Zen Practice for the environment

A study of how Zen practice can help nurturing a healthy view of the environment

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore how Zen can provide practices that help remedy the environmental problems that may arise from how the environment is viewed. I argue that two ingredients should be part of a good strategy to change how one views the environment. Firstly, a good strategy should not be in conflict with the worldview one holds. Secondly, a good strategy should be practical and attractive to follow. With the help of a detailed example from fishing, I show that engaging in Zen provides these two ingredients. I show that it is attractive to incorporate an awareness of the interconnected and impermanent nature of existence and engage in a meditative state when performing tasks because it will both enhance performance and increase mental health. I also argue that there does not need to be a conflict between the worldview one holds and engaging in the proposed Zen practices. The practices Zen provides do not need to be seen as specific to Zen, and the benefits they provide have support in neuroscience. Because Zen provides practices that nurture a greater awareness of how things are interconnected and impermanent, one will gain a better understanding of things in the environment, which will be helpful in remedying the environmental problems that are facing us. I show that through meditation, one will also be able to see things more clearly, perform better, and increase mental health. Because of meditation’s health benefits that help you control the triggering of punishment and reward modules, it will also be easier to make the hard decisions to help the environment because one has the tools to handle difficult emotions.

Keywords: Zen, Buddhism, Environment, Interconnections, Impermanence, Fishing, Meditation practices.
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Introduction

Global warming and environmental problems are one of the most pressing issues of our time. Part of the problem has been viewed as arising from how the environment one inhabits is viewed. Strategies to resolve these problems need to be made. Thus, in this thesis, I argue that Zen can provide a way towards a solution. The main contribution is that through Zen, you can find a way where practice can lead to a better view of the environment. After my aim and research question, a more detailed formulation of the problem and how I will approach it will be presented.

Thesis Aim and research question

In this thesis, I aim to show that Zen Buddhism can provide helpful practices in dealing with the environmental problems that arise from how the environment is viewed.

My research question is: In which way can Zen Buddhism provide practices that help remedy the environmental problems that may arise from how the environment is viewed?

In answering my research question, I argue that Zen can help nurture a view of the environment that is less environmentally problematic. I will argue that you can adopt the Zen practices that help nurture a more environmentally friendly view even if you are not a Buddhist. Lastly, I will argue that there are personal and societal benefits in adopting these Zen practices into your life.

The problem

Many see the problems that arise from how humans view the environment as a big problem for our modern society and a major cause of the environmental problems facing our planet. Many think that the anthropocentric view of the world that arises from the worldviews held by many people is responsible for the environmental problems facing our planet because it posits that humans are the most valuable thing in existence and thus enables an attitude where everything else can serve the human’s wants and needs (Brennan 2014: 7-8). This shows that the value problems arise from how the environment is viewed. Thus, the view of the environment supersedes the question of value.
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This has led to discussions about the Anthropocene and critics of anthropocentrism. Many research areas deal with this basic assumption. Among them, we have ecocentrism and biocentrism as well as discussions of a nature-culture bifurcation, which all share in common the focus on the topic of whether humans in the industrialized world have developed an inappropriate view of the environment and whether the attitude and relationship to the environment that follows from this view is environmentally harmful.

How the environment is viewed is not a topic for an individual discipline. For example, anthropologist Tim Ingold describes it as a shift from a spherical to a global view of our environment. In the spherical view, one lives and views things from within an environment, while in the global view, one views things as if one were outside the environment (Ingold 2000, Chapter 12). In the philosophy of religion, Joanna Leidenhag describes this problem as a bifurcation between nature and culture (Leidenhag 2020:43). While solutions differ, the central premise is similar. Humans in the industrialized world have a view of the environment that enables behavior that is harmful to the environment. A shift in how the environment is viewed is required to remedy this harmful attitude.

There are many viable options for this remedy. However, a central aspect is a shift in how the environment is viewed and, through this shift, valued. Some view ecocentrism as a solution, while others, like Leidenhag, think panpsychism could help provide this shift because panpsychism proposes that all things have a mind or mind-like qualities (Leidenhag 2020:43-44). A feature that is shared between Ingold and Leidenhag is a shift in how one views the environment.

There is a weakness in these philosophical approaches to environmental problems, which Leidenhag accurately pinpoints. One critique Leidenhag makes against panpsychism and in favor of her theological panpsychism is that panpsychism does not provide any shared values that one should follow, making it too individualized (Leidenhag 2022: 147). Even if one were a panpsychist, there is no framework for how one should live in practice. This critique applies to all philosophical approaches that do not have a practical grounding. However, this might be fine because a framework for how one should live and what one should value can be presented. This is just what Leidenhag does with her theological panpsychism. However, this move exemplifies another weakness.

When Leidenhag proposes a theological, even Christian, solution to the problem of how our environment is viewed, she proposes a solution that, at most, can be followed by Christians. This is
a weakness because environmental problems are not restricted to religious people. Though a theological solution might be, at best, beneficial for Christian theology and their community, this problem stretches way beyond theology. Leidenhag’s suggestion becomes something that non-religious people or people from other religions do not have any reason to care about. Because of this, her theological panpsychism will, at best, have a limited effect restricted to Christian people.

This is a weakness that will arise from any solution that is bound to a specific worldview. It does not matter if it is Islamic, Buddhist, naturalist, scientist, or any other stance. As long as it is bound to a specific worldview, the targeted group that might benefit from this is too limited. After all, environmental problems face everything on this planet, not people of one specific worldview.

This is why we need an approach that can target people with both secularized and different religious worldviews. The audience and the number of people willing to follow the suggestion would be much more significant. Thus, I want to find a strategy, through philosophy, that does just that.

There is another dimension to the problem of how the environment is viewed that stems from the fact that it is also a practical problem. Even if it is helpful to philosophize about how the environment is viewed and how this view influences our relationship with the environment to try to reach the bottom of where the issue lies, it must be considered a practical problem. Thus, to approach the problems that arise from how one views the environment, it will be beneficial to also approach it from a more practical dimension. One could argue that this is what advancements in technology are doing. However, if one believes that part of the issue lies in how the environment is viewed, it is naive to think that technology alone can solve the issue without a shift in how one views the environment. This is where philosophy in general and philosophy of religion or worldviews in particular have their place in the debate. Preferably, one should turn to a philosophical approach that combines practice and theory to eliminate issues created by the incompatibilities between theoretical views and practices. After all, the changes in how the environment is viewed have not happened overnight but slowly, together with how one lives in practice.

There are some further complications that I want to address, which are of great relevance, albeit on a more psychological level. People are aware of environmental problems. Even if some people deny this issue, the majority acknowledges it. Nevertheless, among those who acknowledge the issue, there are way fewer that actually do anything. Arguably, one crucial reason must be that it
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is not immediately beneficial or attractive for the individual person. Even if we do not agree with this assumption, one should agree that if it were beneficial for the individual to change their view on the environment, more people would try to do it. I introduce this point because, if it were part of the approach to change how the environment is viewed, it would make that approach much more attractive.

At this stage, we can see that two important ingredients should be part of a good strategy to change how one views the environment. First, a view that does not need to be fettered by the worldview it stems from is preferable. Secondly, a practical approach that is attractive to follow and leads to a healthier view of the environment is preferable.

Introducing Zen as a possible path towards a solution

Why turn to Zen? It is a valid question that needs to be answered. Leidenhag critiqued panpsychism for not providing any shared values that one should follow (Leidenhag 2022: 147). This critique could be made to other approaches, too. For Zen, we do have a long-standing tradition that provides guidance for what to value. Leidenhag’s critique does not seem to apply to Zen. Leidenhag also thinks that panpsychism challenges Christianity because if one believes in it, there is no need for a God (Leidenhag 2022:146). This point could also be adapted to other worldviews. For example, panpsychism challenges a naturalist worldview. We are touching on the previously made point that a desirable approach to changing how one views the environment should not challenge one’s worldview. As will be argued in this thesis, learning from Zen does not need to cause these worldview-based dilemmas.

Philosopher Arne Johan Vetlesen argues for an experience-based philosophy as part of the solution to environmental problems (Vetlesen 2015). As this thesis will show, this is a point to which I agree. As I pointed out earlier, even if how one views the environment can be seen as an essential aspect that has caused our environmental problems, the problems are still practical. The solution needs to be practical. At the same time, if one believes, as I do, that how one views the environment is an important aspect that causes environmental problems, then one also needs to approach this problem from a philosophical angle. We need an approach that combines theory with practice because we have these two dimensions of how things are viewed and the fact that the issues
that arise are practical and need to be dealt with practically. This is where Zen becomes relevant. Zen can be described as a panpsychist worldview (Skrbina 2009:6) and, like many other East Asian philosophies, combines practice and theory (Matthews 2009). Because Zen combines practice and theory, it should be a good option for my endeavor.

As initially stated, I aim to show how Zen practice can help solve environmental problems caused by how one views the environment. I do not intend to defend Zen metaphysics. Still, Zen and its worldview should contain some aspects of what is considered environmentally friendly. Let me quickly introduce some of these aspects.

The Zen Buddhist worldview can be described as panpsychist but also as non-centric and non-dualist. Because it is non-centric, it moves away from anthropocentrism, ecocentrism, and all centrism (Abe 2004:152). As a result of the non-centric and non-dualistic philosophy, everything is equally valuable. As an example, in Enlightenment everything is seen as beautiful. However, this is not how we conventionally think of beauty as the opposite of ugliness. In Enlightenment, there is no distinction between ugliness and beauty. Everything is just what it is, and being what it is is positive, thus the use of the positive term of beautiful (Carter 2017:5). The same reasoning holds for value in Enlightenment; things are just what they are. The distinction between valuable and not valuable has yet to be made. Just as with beauty, being itself is viewed as positive; hence, one can say that everything is valuable. This reasoning is why Zen Buddhism goes as far as to claim the equality of all things, both living and non-living, while still not denoting the significance of individualized human existence.

The same issue I charged Leidenhag’s approach with when I said that theological panpsychism would not be very helpful because it targets too few people is potentially a problem for my approach. The issue would be the same because even if one subscribed to Zen Buddhism and Zen Buddhism had a solution to the problem, most people would not become Zen Buddhists. A Buddhist approach would not be constructive. Nevertheless, if one could incorporate aspects of Zen that are helpful in dealing with how one views the environment without compromising one’s worldview in any significant way, Zen would become an interesting religion, practice, and philosophy to engage with. I will argue that this is the case for Zen and that, because of it, it is helpful.

Zen also has a flexible quality that enables it to merge into many different activities and practices. For example, Zen has managed to penetrate almost all aspects of traditional cultural life in Japan (Suzuki 2019: 21). This ranges from artistic activities to Samurai culture. It has also
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managed to merge into different cultures and traditions with different worldviews. For example, you can do Zen meditation within the Christian Church (Hof 1974). People are also generally familiar with the term Zen in the Western world. The introduction of Zen into Western culture also happened without any significant conflicts. For example, the spread of Christianity and Islam has sometimes been accompanied by organized violence. This cannot be said for Zen. These examples point toward flexibility within Zen that enables you to incorporate it into your life without necessarily claiming to be a Buddhist or dropping your existing worldview. The examples also point toward the possibility of incorporating Zen into one's daily practices, regardless of profession and worldview. I will argue for the correctness of the last point later in the thesis.

Even if the aspects I have presented seem true, I need to show that this is the case. This will be done by using an example of fishing, where I will show that you can incorporate Zen into it even if you are not a Buddhist. I will also show that there are benefits of incorporating Zen into fishing and your life. I will end by showing that it should be attractive to incorporate Zen into your life and help with changing how you view the environment while not necessarily forcing you to change the worldview you already hold.

An argument against my project would be to ask why it would help to turn to Zen Buddhism when Asia, the place of origin, has the same type of environmental problems and does not seem to be doing better than Western countries. This is a valid point that I will leave to other researchers to answer. However, I suspect that the answer can be found in the meeting between Western and Eastern cultures. Until the two cultures met, one could not say that China or Japan was even close to causing the magnitude of today's environmental damage, considering that they were living somewhat similarly as they had been living for the last thousand years. This changed when Western cultures forced themselves upon these cultures.

Previous research

In this section, I will provide a sample of relevant literature that is relevant to my study. I can only provide a small sample because many of the fields I touch upon are quite large.

Much has been written in the field of environmental philosophy and ethics. Some of these thinkers have had a similar approach to mine. Freya Mathew's work “For Love of Matter” (2003) presents a panpsychist philosophy that draws on animism and Daoism. The mingling of Eastern and
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Western philosophy is similar to my approach. Mathews has also written other important works like “The Ecological Self” (2021). In his book “The Denial of Nature: Environmental Philosophy in the Era of Global Capitalism” (2015), Arne Johan Vetlesen argues that environmental philosophy needs to be experience-based. In highlighting the importance of focusing on experience, we get a similarity with my approach, which focuses on practice and, through it, also experience. Even if I will not use these works in my thesis, it is important to highlight them because they share some similarities to my approach. At the same time, I do engage in a very specific tradition, Zen, which they do not, making them less relevant to my work.

Among authors who recently have written about environmental ethics and the topic of ecocentrism, we find Karim Jebari and Anders Sandberg with their article “Ecocentrism and Biosphere Life Extension” and Patricia MacCormack's book “The Ahuman Manifesto Activism for the End of the Anthropocene” (2020). Joanna Leidenhag also touches upon environmental ethics in her work “Minding Creation (2021) and the article “On overcoming the culture–nature divide: a panpsychist proposal” (2020). I only engage with the literature of Leidenhag, not because the other works are irrelevant but because I found Leidenhag's reasoning to be more helpful in formulating the problem I seek to solve.

Using East Asian philosophy is not new. As already mentioned, Mathews uses Daoism. The book “Mind That Abides: Panpsychism in the New Millennium,” edited and partly written by David Skrbina (2009), covers how many East Asian philosophies have a panpsychist character and approach philosophy from practice. These articles are important for my thesis because they help me better describe the character of Zen using terminology that is more familiar to Western philosophers. There are also articles like Evan Thompson’s “Buddhist Philosophy and Scientific Naturalism” (Thompson 2021) and Chien-Te Lins’s “Could the Buddha Have Been a Naturalist?” (Lin 2019).

In the study of Zen Buddhism and applying its ideas to Western philosophy, we have thinkers from the Kyoto school like Nishitani Keiji with “Religion and Nothingness” (1982) and Abe Masao with “Zen and Western Thought” (1985). Jay Garfield has also written on Buddhism and why Buddhist philosophy matters to Western philosophy. Se, for example, “Engaging Buddhism: why it Matters to Philosophy” (Garfield 2015). All of these authors are helpful because they provide a good understanding of Zen philosophy and help me interpret original Zen texts better.
I will also engage in neuroscience to understand meditation and the health benefits Zen can provide. I will primarily draw from Björn Grinde’s work “The Evolution of Consciousness Implications for Mental Health and Quality of Life” (2016). However, the neuroscientific research presented in this work as arguments are well established. For this thesis it will not be necessary to engage in more research. There is, of course, a lot more research made on the topic. Among them, we have the research of Tang Yi-Yuans with “The Neuroscience of Mindfulness Meditation: How the Body and Mind Work Together to Change Our Behaviour” (2017) and “The Neuroscience of Meditation: Understanding Individual Differences (2020).

Method and structure

I will start by presenting and analyzing some critical aspects of Zen Buddhism. My interpretation of how these aspects can be understood will be given. Then, I will move on to the central example of the thesis.

I will use a detailed example of fishing to show how Zen can be incorporated into your life. One reason behind the choice to focus on fishing is because it will help argue for how Zen can help change how one views the environment. I want to show that the nature in which Zen is incorporated into fishing should also work for, at least, many other practices without conflicting with one’s worldview.

A more detailed analysis of the activity needs to be made to see how Zen can become part of fishing. I will thus present a phenomenological reconstruction of fishing. Then, I will present an argumentative evaluation of the results in which I compare fishing with Zen practice to see what in fishing needs to be highlighted and/or changed to turn it into a Zen activity. The aim is to find the elements in fishing that can make it into a Zen activity. The aspects that I then have found need to be tested in two significant ways. First, I need to see if there is something in them that can have an impact on their quality of life and performance. Secondly, I need to explore the relation between these aspects and one’s worldview to see if one is inclined to get into significant conflicts with one’s existing worldview.
I will end by drawing necessary conclusions from the example chapter and argue that the results I have found present a good way to change how one views the environment and, by extension, the environmental problems that are caused by how one views the environment.

Important aspects of Zen

To see how Zen Buddhism could be helpful in changing how one views the environment, I need to introduce and analyze some of its ideas and practices.

Zen Buddhism is a branch of Mahayana Buddhism originating in China. Zen is the Japanese name of this Buddhist branch. However, its roots lie in Chinese Chan Buddhism. Chan and Zen are the same name in different languages. In early Zen, they were the same; however, in Japan, Zen has developed its own culturally specific character and has had different influences on their culture than in China.

Zen Buddhism has incorporated ideas from other Chinese religions like Daoism (Wang 2017:79) and Confucianism (Wang 2017:31). Together with most traditional Chinese, Japanese, and Korean philosophy, Zen can be described as panpsychist in nature (Parks 2009:325). Buddhism, which originally did not have much in common with panpsychism, takes a panpsychist form when entering East Asia, with Zen and Dogen’s philosophy being a prime example (Skrbina 2009:6). The panpsychist nature of Zen is thus one aspect that separates it from Indian Buddhism.

For the reader who has some familiarity with Indian Buddhism but not with East Asian Buddhism, like the tradition of Zen, I want to raise a caution. Some ideas and concepts have different meanings in Zen than in Indian Buddhism.

Let me introduce some foundational Buddhist and Zen Buddhist ideas and how I interpret them.

The theory of dependent origination

An underlying idea in all of Buddhism is that of dependent origination. The theory of dependent origination has three types of dependence: causal dependence, part-whole dependence,
and dependence on conceptual imputation (Garfield 2015:25). Casual dependence claims that no event can exist independent of other events (Garfield 2015:30). Cause and effect relations are thus seen as unavoidable and ever-present.

The second type of dependence is part-whole dependence. The claim is that every whole is dependent on its parts, and every part is dependent on the whole (Garfield 2015:33).

Lastly, dependence on conceptual imputation states that “[…] the entities and properties we experience in the world depend for their reality and identity on our minds, including our perceptual and conceptual apparatus, for their existence as the entities we encounter (Garfield 2015:33).” How one understands this last type of dependence hinges on ones understanding of mind. However, at the most basic level, the way things are humanly perceived is seen as part of what makes entities and properties we experience what they are.

Dependent origination lays the bedrock for the Buddhist metaphysical understanding of the world and the practices employed to navigate existence. The radically non-dualistic conclusions made by Zen philosophers like Dogen rest on the interconnected implications of this theory. Because of this, Dogen can develop his non-dualistic and non-centric philosophy (Abe 2004:152). Nishitani Keiji’s conclusion that one is always in the home-ground of oneself and everything else simultaneously (Nishitani 1982: 64) also derives from this interconnected view of existence that the theory of dependent origination kicks off. Indeed, it is here where Zen philosophy gains panpsychist characteristics because if your self-identity is shared with everything, which thinkers like Dogen and Nishitani advocate, then mentality also needs to be shared with everything. Highlighting Zen’s affinity with panpsychist views is important because viewing things as being equally interconnected with everything should denote discrimination and strong differentiation, something that is viewed as part of the problem of how the environment is viewed.

Even if there is a strong metaphysics to Zen, it is a practical religion. The practical part of Zen is far more important than any metaphysical claims. Even if the two are intertwined.

**Primal confusion and suffering (Dukkha)**

The goal of Zen, like all other Buddhist traditions, is to reach enlightenment and be liberated from suffering (Dukkha) (Garfield 2015:2). Suffering is seen as derived from a primal confusion about the nature of existence. We are inclined not to view existence for what it truly is. Our
liberation from suffering and primal confusion is an awakening to the actual nature of existence (Garfield 2015:2). More concretely, due to primal confusion, we are inclined to view existences as if phenomena are permanent, independent with inherent essences when the opposite is true. Existence is impermanent and interdependent, and there are no inherent essences (Garfield 2015: 8).

What is meant by suffering or \textit{Dukkha} needs further explanation because the translated word suffering does not encompass the whole meaning of \textit{Dukkha}. There are three dimensions to the idea of suffering (\textit{Dukkha}). The first and most obvious is that of concrete mental and physical pain. This encompasses all the hardships one encounters that cause physical and mental distress. Even if nothing bad happens to you, bad things happen around you. People are suffering, and things are being hurt and destroyed. This, too, can cause distress (Garfield 2015: 7). This is all part of the first dimension of suffering.

The second dimension of \textit{Dukkha} is that things are constantly changing, and we know it. When happy, you know that this will not last forever. When healthy, you know that the day will come when your health will dwindle, and ultimately, you and everyone around you will die. In the face of the ever-changing impermanent nature of existence, this helplessness causes humans distress (Garfield 2015: 8).

The third dimension of \textit{Dukkha} is that we live in an interdependent world. No matter what one does, suffering could potentially be around the corner, and there is nothing one can do about it. One cannot control what people think or do, and neither can one control how nature and natural phenomena behave. One could be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Lightning could strike someone one cares for or oneself. Even an innocent action from oneself could cause someone or something one cares about harm and thus cause them and oneself distress. The myriad of causal chains that are part of existence cannot be controlled, and this causes distress (Garfield 2015: 8). If one resists the nature of existence, then suffering will arise. This could be all from anxiety about what might happen or what has already happened. However, as soon as one engages in these anxious activities, one is attached to something. This is where the Buddhist idea of not being attached to anything becomes relevant.

Attachment has a physical and mental dimension. Physically, the more one is attached to something or someone; the more one will feel that one might lose if that thing or person ceases to be part of one’s life. The more profound aspect of attachment is the mental. If one constantly fears what might happen or what already has happened, one fetters the mind to an idea and impedes it from functioning freely and optimally. This is probably the most important part of the idea of
attachment. Do not let your mind get stuck on anything you cannot control. Even if one controls something, letting your mind get attached to that thought will impede you. In that case, one should do something and let yourself, your thoughts, and your life move forward.

Crudely presented, what does it help to dwell on something one has lost? It cannot change anything and just causes distress and stops one from moving forward into the inevitable new. Similarly, what does it help to dwell on things that might happen that are out of your control to influence? Letting go of these attachments will help one to move forward and make the best of the life one has. If you let go of that which you dwell on and are attached to, you will feel better and move forward into new experiences, and your past and fears of the future will not hinder you from pursuing a happy life.

Without having to fully commit to the complete extent of the metaphysics underlying these ideas, we can at least accept that the observations made from the idea of suffering are, at least, most of the times, valid. It is the case that the ideas that suffering or Dukkha present, at least mostly cover what causes us humans suffering and feelings of distress. In this thesis, this is all that is needed to be accepted. Indeed, researchers like Grinde, drawing on neuroscience, claim that the path to a happy life is connected with turning off the triggering of the part of the brain that provides distress (Grinde 2014:213). This type of scientific research supports the Buddhist idea that the key to a happy life lies in handling the emotions that cause distress and negative feelings. Let us now move into what enlightenment is and how it is reached because, as will be shown, it is tightly related to the psychological dimension of Suffering (Dukkha).

**Enlightenment**

How enlightenment is understood will be essential for this thesis. Enlightenment is also a challenging idea to approach. One main reason is that it seems like an unbelievable state taken from fairy tales. In this section, I will argue that one can understand enlightenment in a much more realistic and grounded way without taking away from the more extreme interpretation of the concept. An analysis of enlightenment and its many dimensions needs to be done.
Enlightenment is viewing things clearly

Suzuki describes enlightenment as intuitively looking into the nature of things as opposed to an analytical and logical understanding of things (Suzuki 1996:98). In this sense, enlightenment is seeing things for what they truly are. How the true nature of things is described varies, and the terminology used tends to intertwine with each other. Dogen uses Buddha-nature to describe the true nature of things (Kim 2004:128). Realizing Buddha-nature is seeing things “such as they are” or, the more commonly used term “suchness.” In this way, enlightenment is viewing that which is part of existence clearly and for what it truly is.

Enlightenment, realizing Buddha-nature and seeing things in its suchness, is also intertwined with the concept of emptiness. Abe points out that viewing something in its suchness is the same as saying that something is empty (Abe 2004:209). As a result, emptiness can also be seen as pointing towards the true nature of things. However, the concept of emptiness is not as straightforward as the others because it is commonly used in an interrogative fashion to point toward the true nature of things. To state that something is empty is the same as to state that it is empty of all the qualities we wrongly would ascribe to it. Thus, it is viewing something such as it is. As we can see now, to be enlightened is the same as viewing that which appears in existence clearly and for what it truly is.

The idea that enlightenment is viewing existence clearly can seem both too simple and impossible. It will seem impossible because it would seem like one who is enlightened suddenly knows everything because one views things for what they truly are. In this understanding, enlightenment is so fantastical, almost magical, that it will feel hard to come even close to it. One could also argue that many enlightened monks throughout history clearly did not know everything. For example, did the Zen patriarchs know about atoms? An understanding of enlightenment that hinges on knowledge does not hold up, and as I will show shortly, should be seen as a flawed, inaccurate view of enlightenment.

At the other end of the spectrum, enlightenment might seem too simple because if one takes away the knowledge claim I presented previously, then it would seem that enlightenment only means seeing clearly the things that are accessible for one to see. Part of the magic is removed from the idea. However, this interpretation is probably the best and, as I will show shortly, should not be seen as such a small feat but as something exceedingly hard. To get to the root of this, we need to
move into the space where practice meets enlightenment. That is, how enlightenment is practically presented.

**Reaching enlightenment and its practice**

The best tool to reach enlightenment is considered to be Zazen or sitting meditation. However, ultimately, one should function to the best of one’s ability at every stage of practice (Abe 1991: 67). To fully function at every stage of practice is basically to constantly be in a state of meditation where nothing one does is obstructed by anything internal or external (Hui-neng 2021:88-89). As the Sixth patriarch, Hui-Neng, explains in the Platform Sutra, one is in an enlightened state when one “[…]whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, always [is] practicing with an undivided mind (Hui-neng 2021:80).”

What is meant by an undivided mind? Hui-neng explains that by acting with an undivided mind, one acts without being obstructed by anything external or internal (Hui-neng 88-89). This means that you should not let your mind or body get stuck on anything. One should not dwell on someone’s actions, let one’s mind depart to the future, consider “what if” scenarios, or dwell on the past. Instead, one should be right here, right now, in the present. When this is done, all that the idea of suffering (*Dukkha*) entails does not impede how one acts.

It is common in Zen to say that you should “empty your mind.” This emptying of the mind is the same as not letting oneself become attached to anything. However, it does not mean that nothing is in one’s mind; in that case, one would be unconscious (Hui-Neng 2021:81). Hui-Neng says, “The Way has to flow without obstruction. Why would you block it? The Way flows freely when the mind doesn’t dwell on anything. Once it dwells on something, it is imprisoned (Hui-neng 81-82).”

Further, there is no mind-body separation; both are one and work together without hindrance (Hui-Neng 2021:84). Again, enlightenment is the negation of suffering (*Dukkha*) because that which causes distress does not have any negative effect on the enlightened person.

The essential part of enlightenment could then be said that one is able to view things in existence without letting one's mind be tainted by any intrusive thought or feeling. That is, none of the wants and needs, hopes, expectations, preconceived notions, or physical sensations distract one from seeing or experiencing what’s in front of oneself. To put it differently, there is nothing mental or physical influencing the way one perceives the world in a negative way. In this interpretation,
enlightenment becomes more like seeing things as clearly as possible as determined by the
information one is provided with and within the limits of one’s genetics. This is what Abe means
when he says that one should function to the best of one’s ability in every stage of practice (Abe
1991: 67). Practice means everything one does because as long as one lives, all one can do is
practice something. This last point is important because there is a conditional in enlightenment.
Because enlightenment is viewing existence clearly and thus subjective, it will also be true that
when enlightened, one will view things as clearly as possible, considering one’s knowledge,
experience, and genetic limitations. Still, this is a tough state to reach because it is basically the
same as reaching a state where your performance is enhanced to its peak.

We should now see that enlightenment is not as tightly connected with knowledge as it
might seem. Instead of focusing on “what is out there,” it shifts the focus to how one perceives the
things in existence. In this way, enlightenment is subjective, and indeed, enlightenment is never the
same for different individuals.

**Enlightenment, No-mind and performance enhancement**

Thus far, the main focus has been on how things are viewed in enlightenment. However, what about
how one acts? At the end of the last section, I stated that there is a similarity between enlightenment
and performance enhancement. This dimension of enlightenment needs to be explored further.

The term no-mind is often used when addressing the more practical dimension of how one
acts when enlightened. The concept of no-mind is intertwined with the concepts describing
enlightenment. No-mind is described as a state without a mind and body separation (Suzuki
1996:262). Thus, the Zen understanding of no-mind describes a state where the mind is undivided.
An undivided mind also signifies enlightenment making no-mind an enlightened state. Here, the
aspect of functioning to the best of one's ability (Abe 1991: 67) gets a more prominent and practical
nature.

Even if enlightenment is no-mind the same relation does not go the other way. If one were
enlightened, one would be in a state of no-mind, but in a state of no-mind, one need not be
enlightened. The difference lies in the scope of the claims the concepts are making. No-mind
focuses on a state one can achieve when practicing something, while enlightenment focuses on an
overall state achieved over multiple practices and across one's life.
This point becomes clearer because no-mind can and has been used to help people reach their full potential in specific activities. Examples of this can be taken from the art of swordsmanship. When Zen Monk Takuan instructs master swordsman Yaguyu Munnenori in Zen and reveals that he should be in a state of no-mind when practicing his art (Suzuki 2019:147), he is highlighting how an enlightened state can be achieved in specific activities even if one is not an enlightened person. Nevertheless, these people cannot be seen as fully enlightened. In the case of the samurai, he should then have stopped with his profession. This relation needs to be untangled.

Because no-mind, just like enlightenment, is a meditative state where one acts with an undivided mind and is not distracted by intrusive thoughts and irrelevant sensations, there is nothing that hinders one from fully utilizing what one knows as efficiently as possible so that one can realize one's full capability. Further, one will also perceive the situation as clearly as possible for oneself as an individual, which will also help to guide one in performing to the best of one’s ability. This is where the performance enhancing aspect starts to reveal itself. The difference between no-mind and enlightenment is that in enlightenment, one is in a state of no-mind regardless of the activity performed. However, this does not mean that one cannot be in the state of no-mind in some activities and, within that activity, be enlightened.

Some might notice that in this dimension of enlightenment, there is an affinity to the more well-known Western concept of flow. This is a valid parallel because, as Suzuki points out, our Western concept of a flow state describes the same state as that of no-mind (Suzuki 2019:117ff). The state of flow can be described as follows: “Flow is a harmonious and intrinsically rewarding state characterized by concentration on the task at hand and absorption in a specific activity, to the exclusion of irrelevant thoughts and emotions, and a sense of everything coming together or clicking into place, even in challenging situations (Swann 2017: 48)”. Flow is a popular concept in the research of excellent athletic performance (Ibid.). The importance is that when one is in a state of flow, one excels in the task that is performed. Once in it, you perform to the best of your ability, just like when you function to the best of your ability when enlightened or in the state of no-mind.

Does this mean that flow and no-mind are the same as enlightenment? Of course not; enlightenment must be seen as a broader concept encompassing more. Flow and no-mind can be obtained in specific activities, and within the borders of these activities, one is enlightened because, within the limit of that activity, you view things clearly and perform to the best of your ability. To be an enlightened person, however, is to be in this state most of the time, regardless of the activity one partakes in. Even if the state is the same, there is a big difference between no-mind and
enlightenment. No-mind describes an enlightened state of mind the enlightened person always has. This, however, does not exclude that the non-enlightened can be in this state sometimes and in some activities.

What is of special interest here is the performance enhancing aspect of no-mind and enlightenment. Because no-mind and flow states are affiliated with performance enhancement, we can see that enlightenment is performance-enhancing and that this performance-enhancing state can be obtained even if not enlightened. This also signifies something that makes pursuing enlightenment attractive for the individual and grounding the idea to a more obtainable level. No-mind and flow are more easily obtained.

The benefits of enlightenment continue beyond here. The most significant claim in Buddhism is that it is a path that liberates one from suffering (Dukkha). Another way to phrase this is that it should make one a more happy person. Let me address this point in more detail.

**Enlightenment and mental health**

I have now touched upon the performance-enhancing aspect of enlightenment. However, enlightenment is also mood-enhancing. The main goal of enlightenment and Zen is to live a happy life because one has overcome or come to terms with suffering (Dukkha) and realized how the world works. When enlightenment is reached, one is happy and free of suffering (Dukkha).

In the light of neuroscience, one can interpret the aspect of happiness differently. Grinde clarifies that meditation is good because it helps one to turn off the triggering of pain and punishment as well as reward signals in your brain (Grinde 2014:213). This brings one to the human baseline, which is contentment (Grinde 2014:175). Viewed in this light, one key reason why enlightenment makes one happy is that, in it, one will be able to stay in a state of contentment because, through meditation, one has learned to control the triggering of punishments and rewards.

It could be argued that we do not want to get rid of the triggering of rewards. However, this should not be seen as an issue. First of all, it is not getting rid of rewards but controlling them and being able, through viewing things clearly, to determine when one gets good or bad rewards. One should remember that the triggering of rewards in itself does not necessarily lead to good choices. It might lead to grave addictions if one only listens to the reward signals. For example, you see candy or alcohol, want it, and thus consume it. If you do it consistently, this will lead to alcoholism and
sugar addiction, which in turn leads to health problems, both physical and mental. Secondly, the state of contentment is viewed as being connected with living a happy life, not immediate pleasure and rewards (Grinde 2014:175).

These benefits will, of course, be present in enlightenment; however, if one can enter into a state of no-mind or flow in an activity, the same will happen, making one feel good in that moment and, at least, provide some mental rest. I will return to this point in more detail further down.

**Attaining enlightenment**

A final issue needs to be addressed. What does it mean to attain enlightenment? There are many understandings of this, which differ depending on Buddhist traditions. Is it something you get and then you are enlightened, or is it something that needs to be maintained? Initially, there seems to be a conflict within Zen traditions regarding this topic. It is usually said that the Rinzai school of Zen believes in instant enlightenment, while the Soto school believes in gradual enlightenment. However, from both sides, you understand that enlightenment should be maintained. Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen, believes in maintaining enlightenment (Shobogenzo), and so does the influential Rinzai Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (Ekaku 1999). In his work Wild Ivy, Hakuin Ekaku explicitly argues against anyone who believes that their job is done once they have experienced satori (enlightenment). He states that you will experience many significant and minor satoris throughout your life (Ekaku 1999).

Hui-neng also addresses this issue by claiming that the difference between gradual and instantaneous enlightenment has to do with the individual. If you have trained for many years, it is fair to talk about instantaneous enlightenment. However, it is fair for the beginner or novice to talk about gradual enlightenment (Hui-Neng 2021:83). The vital thing to take away here is that even the enlightened person can go in and out of enlightenment.

Zen can be seen as an anti-intellectual tradition, which could make it incompatible or, at least, unattractive to many people. However, the anti-intellectual aspect of Zen does not mean that it is anti-thinking; it just means that it privileges one type of thinking above the other. Hui-Neng explicitly points out that your mind should not really be empty because that would mean that you are unconscious, but that you should let your thoughts flow without obstruction (Hui-Neng 2021:81-82). Without getting into this too deeply, it should be clear that Zen is not against creative
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and innovative thinking but rather is skeptical towards strictly intellectual thinking, where one lets one's mind stop on something. That Zen is anti-intellectual thinking is not necessarily the case because it seems reasonable that one could think intellectually without letting one's mind stop at any point. That is, even in intellectual thinking, one should be able to let thoughts flow intellectually. Thus, my claim at the beginning of this paragraph that Zen is anti-intellectual need not be valid. However, something Zen views negatively is attaching to a thought, which is very easy, especially in theorizing. This is a point that needs more research that has to be done elsewhere.

What is valued in Zen?

A final topic that should be quickly addressed concerns the topic of values. This thesis is not about value in Zen, so I cannot go into it in too much detail. This will have to be another point where further research should be made. However, there is a point in making a broader conclusion about value related to Leidenhag's critique of panpsychism. She critiqued panpsychism for not providing any guidance on how one should live. This critique does not apply to Zen because it does give guidance for how one should live by providing practical tools to reach enlightenment. This also entails that more values are shifted to a practical dimension where Zen practice is that with the most value. The value lies in how one lives one's life and in the pursuit of enlightenment. As I have shown, pursuing enlightenment includes pursuing mental health, viewing existence for what it is, and performing to the best of one's ability. The value lies in how one acts and approaches the world.

Applying Zen practice to an example

Thus far, I have shown that Zen is a non-centric philosophy that, when followed, changes the way our environment is viewed to a more panpsychist view of the environment. It is also a move away from an anthropocentric view of the environment that challenges the same types of view of the environment that ecocentric and biocentric philosophies criticize. If followed, Zen should change the way the environment is viewed.

The essential point from the previous section is that the state of enlightenment, in the form of no-mind, is attainable even if one is not enlightened. Enlightenment and Zen Buddhism, which ultimately seek to overcome suffering (Dukkha), are also good for mental health and performance
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enhancement. These points should make Zen practice attractive to engage in. Zen supports these
conclusions and has scientific support.

Zen practice thus has the potential to change the way one views the environment while at the
same time providing performance and health benefits. Zen really seems to provide attractive
practices to engage in. As I have said, a good strategy to change how one views the environment
should be attractive to follow. Zen's performance and health benefits make my approach attractive
to follow.

The other important point for a good strategy to change how one views the environment is
that it should not get in conflict with one's worldview. How the environment is viewed, and the
environmental problems that are caused by how the environment is viewed are relevant for
everyone, regardless of worldview and profession. Thus, practices that will help to change how one
views the environment should be compatible with many worldviews and practices that are part of
the life one leads. This is a point that needs to be made. Thus, I will now move into an example to
show that Zen practice does not need to be in conflict with one's worldview and the practices one
engages in. In my example, I will also return to the performance-enhancing and health benefits that
Zen should provide because these would make my approach attractive to follow. The performance-
enhancing and health-beneficial aspects that Zen provides also need to be explored in relation to a
specific practice so that one can better understand how these benefits can be obtained.

Why use fishing as an example fishing?

There are a couple of reasons why I use fishing as an example. The most personal one is
because I am a fisherman and am knowledgeable in the activity. This should help me create a good,
detailed, and accurate example. Another important reason is that some of the aspects that make Zen
helpful in changing how one views the environment will be highlighted through this example.
Fishing is also an activity that is performed all over the world and is not culturally specific. This is
helpful because it helps me not make my argument target just one specific activity in one
worldview. The example is universal. It is also an activity that Zen monks do not perform, and thus,
it will help show how Zen can be infused into activities and worldviews that are not already part of
the tradition.
The reader needs to remember that this is just an example and that I could have chosen many other examples.

**How do I define fishing?**

The fishing I will focus on is fishing with handheld equipment. The handheld equipment is fishing rods of different kinds, which are used to fish with artificial, live, or dead bait. These baits range from all types of fishing lures and flies or worms to other organic baits that are dead or alive. I will primarily focus on fishing with artificial baits like flies and lures.

Fishing is an outdoor activity that takes place on land or from different kinds of boats. The boats include, among others, canoes, kayaks, fishing boats, and float tubes. One can also fish while standing in the water and wearing waders. How I define fishing could be called recreational fishing or sports fishing, which can be contrasted with commercial fishing. I do not focus on commercial fishing. In Sweden, the sports fisherman usually releases his/her fish back into the water.

To summarize, fishing is a recreational outdoor activity where one spends time by or on the water with handheld fishing equipment trying to catch a fish.

**Key aspects of fishing and Zen**

It is time to start analyzing what happens with fishing when the Zen aspects I have presented are introduced. To do that, we first need to break down the fishing experience into smaller components. A phenomenological reconstruction of fishing needs to be done. I will not be able to cover all aspects of fishing. Instead, I will mainly focus on the aspects that are relevant if one wants to incorporate Zen into the activity of fishing and how that influences the activity.

I will focus on the most relevant aspects of fishing, for my focus is to show what happens to fishing when specific aspects provided by Zen are introduced into the activity. After I have analyzed one aspect of fishing, I will compare it to Zen.
Nature and the space we fish in.

Fishing entails moving into a different space than one usually inhabits. The changing of the space one inhabits is an essential part of fishing. How should one most accurately describe this move? It might seem intuitive to describe fishing as a nature experience. However, it will be easy to find counterexamples. Is it a nature experience if one is fishing in a channel in the middle of a town? Whether it is a nature experience to fish in a town is questionable. One could argue that fishing is only sometimes a nature experience, or one could claim that nature is not an essential category necessary for fishing. Considering that nature is such a complicated concept with so much varied cultural baggage attached to it, one can also see that using it might not even be desirable. I agree, and in this section, I will argue that fishing is an interconnected experience. It demands a greater understanding of the interconnected space one fishes in, and it is beneficial to actively nurture this type of knowledge.

Even if fishing can be a nature experience, the issue is that one can fish in any setting where there are waters that contain fish. These locations can both be in the wilderness and in cities. Further, to separate between engaging in the natural world as opposed to a cultural one is complicated. Even if natural aspects like water conditions, water temperature, seasons, animal insects, and plant life, among other things, play an important role for the fisherman, the human aspect is just as important. Things like boat traffic, man-made structures like bridges, the regulation of water levels by hydroelectric plants, and, of course, environmental changes and human pollution play a significant part in the fishing experience. Thus, any distinction between nature and culture is not appropriate.

What the natural and cultural aspects have in common in fishing is that one should get in contact with and understand one's surroundings, whether cultural or natural. In this sense, one makes a move towards an interconnected understanding of the environment. One will learn by experience how things are interconnected, and the more one learns, the better one will become at predicting the fish's behavior. For example, knowing how water temperatures and wind conditions affect the targeted fish species will help in catching fish. So, too, is knowing how the opening and closing of the dam of a hydroelectric plant or boat traffic affects the fish.

Fishing is thus better described as an active engagement in how things are interconnected. Of course, there are many other relevant ways that things are interconnected for the fisherman.
However, what is necessary for now is to point out that we do not have a clear separation between a natural and cultural sphere and that understanding how things work in an interconnected way, regardless of natural and cultural aspects, is central to fishing. People fish in an interconnected space without a nature-culture distinction.

**Interconnectedness supersedes nature and culture.**

My concept of interconnectedness covers nature and culture. In a sense, interconnectedness lacks the negative and complicated connotations that the concepts of nature and culture have. Nature can often be put in a dichotomy against culture. At the same time, humans are part of nature. This often creates confusion and problems in defining nature. Using concepts like pristine nature to get a purer definition of nature is also problematic because this does not exist. Besides, should we separate the human sphere from the natural? That would lead to a bifurcation between the two, which Leidenhag thinks causes environmental damage (Leidenhag 2020:43).

When focusing on interconnectedness, the view is expanded to focus on how all things are connected. Both the natural and cultural are necessarily incorporated because everything is, at least to some extent, interconnected. This claim should not need extra support, and it is not needed to accept Zen’s ideas of strong interconnectedness and non-dualism. The claim is more in line with the following: “At least most things are interconnected, in one way or another, with other things in existence.” Because a focus on interconnectedness necessarily includes nature and culture, and indeed any other potential thing or concept, I opt to try to use the nature concept as little as possible.

We can now conclude that fishing is an interconnected experience that nurtures an interconnected understanding of the environment one is fishing in. It involves a move into an active engagement in the interconnected nature of existence. There is a clear connection here with Zen. Let us explore the connection between the interconnected aspect of fishing and Zen and its effects on how one views the environment.
Interconnectedness in Zen and fishing

Interconnectedness is a crucial aspect of Zen that leads to its more environmentally friendly panpsychistic worldview. However, how does fishing compare to Zen, and how does this aspect of fishing change if one infuses Zen into fishing?

Part of enlightenment is the realization that we live in an interconnected world and that everything is dependent on each other. I went through the theory of dependent origination earlier, and we can see that at least the first two types of dependence are important for the fisherman. Causal dependence is important because one is in a causal situation where cause and effect are central to one's success. For example, how do the seasons and weather conditions affect the fish, oneself, and the accessibility to the waters? Even more central is that the fisherman actively tries to cause a fish to bite their bait. In this sense, one engages in the cause-and-effect relation of the fish's lifecycle. Cause and effect are (obviously) part of the activity called fishing.

The second type of dependence was part whole dependence, which states that every part is dependent on a whole, and every whole is dependent upon its parts. This is also important in fishing because one needs to consider the bigger picture. Many different aspects are important for the fisherman's success. The more one can put these potentially minor aspects and parts into a bigger picture, the more success one will have. For example, the water's health depends on the organisms in and around the water, and the organism's health depends on the water's health. Thus, to understand the whole, one needs to understand the parts; both are equally dependent on each other. Part whole dependence is thus also part of the fishing experience, and the more one understands it, the more one actively tries to grasp it, the better fisherman one will become, and fishing will turn more into a Zen activity.

Even the third dependence is important. Dependence on conceptual imputation is important because ideas and concepts of things are needed to navigate within the fishing experience. Without the concept of a crankbait (Wobbler), one cannot know that this might be a lure option to try out. How can a rod be a rod without the concept of a rod? Concepts are needed to create an understanding of the surroundings. This ranges from understanding the concept of fish, weather, water, etc.

We can now see that engaging in interconnectedness will benefit the fisherman, and the better one understands it, the more successful one should become.
This line of thinking aligns with Zen Buddhism because the more one engages in and realizes the interconnected nature of existence, the closer to enlightenment one will come. As was already stated, the closer to enlightenment one comes, the better one performs. The same is the case of interconnectedness in fishing. The better one understands how things are interconnected, the better fisherman one should become.

Zen and fishing seem to be in line with each other, and to make fishing more of a Zen activity, one should lean into the interconnected nature of things. This should have a positive effect on the fishing. However, there are grades to which one needs to engage in the interconnected nature of fishing. To an extent, the aspects I have presented are not something one needs to think about; it just happens because existence is structured so that one cannot avoid cause-and-effect relations, part-whole relations, and the relation between one's thoughts and surroundings. However, to make fishing more of a Zen activity, you must actively try to become more aware of these aspects. Instead of just going out and fishing as one always does, one should try to understand how things are related. In the process of understanding and engaging in interconnectedness, one's view of the environment should start to change.

Learning how things are interconnected and working together can be done in activities that are not fishing because, at least to some extent, existence is interconnected. Knowing how things work together should always be helpful. Even if interconnectedness gains a special place in fishing, it is an aspect that is part of existence in general. One can thus also try to understand interconnectedness in other activities better and gain the effects of how one views the environment in these activities, too.

An exploration component will also make fishing more of a Zen activity because one actively tries to figure out new waters by putting oneself in new situations with new interconnected relations. Thus, one must draw on one's understanding of the interconnected relations to be successful. In contrast, if one only fishes in the same waters, after a while, one will, to an extent, have figured out that water purely based on experience. Trying different waters will hone these skills.

It is important to note that one does not need to lean into these aspects. Going fishing without trying to understand how things are interconnected is possible. One could simply throw out a lure and hope for a fish; however, if one fishes regularly, one's experience will teach how some things are interconnected through experience, whether one wants it or not. The difference will be that it will take longer to learn how things are interconnected, and one would, most likely, not learn
as much or gain as good an understanding of how things are interconnected as the person who actively tries to understand the interconnected relations that are relevant for the fisherman.

A secondary point is that in understanding how things are interconnected, one should also start to understand one's place in existence better. This should be beneficial for life in general.

What tools Zen provides to help one understand how things are interconnected, other than directing one's focus to these aspects, remains to be seen.

**Confronting the unknown unpredictable and uncontrollable**

Another important aspect of fishing is the confrontation with the unknown, unpredictable and uncontrollable. This aspect is related to interconnectedness. Even if you, as a fisherman, try to understand the fish and trick it into biting, you are constantly confronted with the fact that your knowledge is lacking. The behavior of the fish is dictated by an infinite number of aspects that are out of one's control. Things like the weather can make a huge difference. It influences the fish's behavior, whether sunny, cloudy, or partly cloudy. The wind conditions, or what the wind conditions were the previous day, are relevant. The water temperature is also important, and the year's season makes a difference. It is also relevant if someone has just fished the spot one is fishing at and what other animals inhabit the water. For example, in the Swedish archipelago, seals can come to a bay and butcher much of the pike population. Diseases in the fish or the fish's food are relevant. Also, diseases in fish-eating predators like birds can be of relevance. Of course, these aspects are not restricted to natural phenomena. If a river has hydroelectric plants, it will affect migrating fish species. Whether the dam of the hydroelectric plant is open will affect the fish behavior and the fishing. Boat traffic, pollution from farmers, deforestation, and construction in or beside the water all make a difference. In short, the interconnected elements presented previously, which are an important part of fishing, are responsible for the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable nature of fishing. As I defined the concept of interconnectedness, these aspects encompass natural and cultural elements. Even if the experienced fisherman has knowledge and understanding of the effects of many of the mentioned conditions, there will always be things that are out of one's control, making fishing an unpredictable activity where one is faced with the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. Thus, confronting the unknown, unpredictable, and
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uncontrollable becomes an essential part of fishing. If a fisherman does not reconcile with this aspect of fishing, he risks making fishing a very frustrating experience.

The unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable aspect is also relevant for Zen because it can be connected to what causes suffering (Dukkha). Let us move on and explore the connections between the two and examine how this aspect of fishing can be adjusted if one wants to infuse more Zen into it.

**The unknown, unpredictable and uncontrollable in Zen and fishing**

The heading of this section is the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable in Zen and fishing. However, maybe it should be attachment and fishing because there is an important connection between the two, and one can see that attachment is closely related to the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. The aspect of the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable can be drawn from the idea of suffering (Dukkha). As I have mentioned already, the more profound aspect of suffering (Dukkha) is the constant potentiality of suffering and that there is nothing one can do about it. Part of the problem of suffering (Dukkha) is related to control; one cannot control everything, and this causes distress. The other aspect of suffering (Dukkha) is that there are things unknown which are beyond control or what one can prepare for. A third aspect can be described as powerlessness. Even if one knows some things, there might not be anything one can do about them. Imagine seeing a tsunami wave approaching you while you are on the beach. There is nothing you can do to stop it; you are powerless. In Zen Buddhism, these aspects are something that can ruin one's experiences, and only by reconciling with it or letting go of the attachment to both things and ideas can one live a happy life. As Hui-Neng reminds us, only if one lets one's mind and body flow like the river and adapt and react to what is in the moment and not let one's mind and body attach and stop on anything will one find enlightenment and thus happiness (Hui-neng 2021:81-82).

The Zen idea that attachment can ruin one's experience should apply to everything, and it is true for fishing. It is easy to ruin a day of fishing by becoming overly attached to lures and fishing equipment or the idea of success because, in the end, one might not catch anything and lose lures and equipment. This aspect is always present in a fisherman's life, and one will learn not to get too attached to either of these ideas. If one becomes too attached to the idea of catching a fish, one risks ruining the fishing experience if a fish is not caught. In this way, becoming too attached to things, like one's equipment or catching fish, you risk negatively affecting your experience because when it
comes down to it, these are things that can happen because of the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable aspect of fishing, and indeed, life itself.

The affinity between Zen and the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable aspect of fishing should be clear by now. One has to confront the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable appropriately so as not to ruin the experience, just like one has to confront suffering (Dukkha) and attachment in Zen. The unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable aspect of fishing or suffering (Dukkha) can also be translated to life in general. There are always things that are unknown, unpredictable, and out of one's control to influence. The unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable aspect of fishing is thus not specific to fishing.

Even if the fisherman is always confronted with the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable and, to some extent, learns how to deal with it, there is always room for improvement. I fish regularly, and even if I think about these ideas, I still have days by the water where I let the fact that I have lost a lot of baits, a big fish, or not getting any fish negatively affect my mood. I am sure every fisherman can relate to this. Therefore, there is an area where one can infuse Zen to both improve the fishing experience and make fishing more of a Zen activity. How to do so is another question, and we will come to it later on when addressing the meditative aspect of Zen and fishing.

**Impermanence in fishing**

Closely related to the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable is the engagement in the impermanent nature of things. Seasons change, water temperatures change, water structure changes, and the spaces where the fish stand change. For fishermen fishing from land, impermanence will be even more important. Some places where one can fish may become overgrown some years later, making it hard to cast from that spot. There are also spots where one can fish easily in spring before the water vegetation has fully grown and in the fall when the water vegetation has started to die off. In midsummer, however, these spots can be so full of water vegetation that it is almost impossible to fish there. The same can be true for land vegetation that, during the summer, is so dense that one cannot stand and cast there.

Another aspect is that the fish might not bite on the same bait the next day. The lure or color of a lure that works one day might not work the next day. It can be due to weather conditions or due
to some unknown reason. The fish’s behavior is also constantly changing. One is also forced to notice environmental changes. If you fish in the same lake for many years, you will notice the changes in the ecosystem. A lake can start being overgrown due to the water becoming too high in nutrition. This will change the amount of fish in the water and the species that thrive and do not thrive. One will also notice changes in animal life. One may notice if a bird suddenly moves to a lake one regularly fishes. For example, this summer, I noticed a heron had moved to the local lake where I usually fish. One will also notice the life cycles of plants. If you fish in areas with mushrooms and berries, you will see when they are ripe for picking. The list goes on.

As a fisherman, one will inevitably notice when the ice breaks and covers the lake, and if you are ice fishing, you will notice the ice quality. Thus, you will notice if the water remains warmer in the fall or if the ice breaks earlier. The effects of global warming will actively confront the fishermen and force them to notice these changes.

Part of the impermanent aspect of fishing can be connected to attachment. Lures will be lost, and equipment will eventually break. Nothing lasts forever. If one is too attached to lures, one will become sad when losing them and thus risk ruining the fishing experience. This is not worth it. Therefore, one should develop an attitude that makes one fine with losing and breaking things. This is an essential part of fishing. Nothing will last forever. Here is a point of overlap between impermanence and the unknown, unpredictable and uncontrollable.

The confrontation with impermanence also takes shape in the form of death. The most obvious aspect of this lies in the killing of fish. Because fish die and the fisherman, if he wants to bring home a fish, has to kill it, death is ever-present. At the same time, one also actively relies on death and killing to catch a fish. If you fish with worms, you are relying on fish eating the worm and thus killing it. Using any bait relies on the fish’s instinct to eat and thus kill their prey. This is a necessary condition to catch fish. The fishermen actively engage in the natural cycle of hunting, killing, and providing food. In this sense, the fishermen are putting themselves on the same level as the fish and doing the same as the fish. The predator fish hunt prey to eat. The fishermen act as predators and also hunt prey. Like the predator fish, which try to trick and overpower their prey, the fishermen do the same thing. In this way, the fishermen are on the same level as the fish they are hunting.

The killing of prey is also connected to life because, without the killing and eating of the fish’s food source, the fish would not thrive. Thus, death is also reliant on life. Therefore, it is important to notice that here, death is not a bad thing, nor a good thing; it is something in-between.
Death for one thing means life for another; in that sense, the scales are evened out. The fisherman actively engages with this balance between life and death and acknowledges the predators inside themselves.

The impermanent aspect of fishing is related to both the interconnected and unknown, unpredictable and uncontrollable aspects of fishing. Because things are in constant flux, one cannot know many things. What once was will never stay the same. Thus, there is a tight relation between impermanence and the unknown, unpredictable and uncontrollable. Where impermanence describes how things change, the unknown is directed toward the personal experience where you are constantly running uphill and trying to reach the top of knowledge but never succeeding.

The interconnected aspect ties into impermanence because it makes it even harder to figure things out. Changing bird habits due to the impermanent nature of things will affect fishing because of the interconnected nature of things. These three concepts are thus tightly related to each other and can only stand alone in a theoretical sense.

**Impermanence in Zen and fishing**

Impermanence is one of the most central ideas in Zen Buddhism. Stambaugh argues in her work on Dogen’s philosophy, “Impermanence is Buddha-nature,” that, as the title states, impermanence precisely is Buddha-nature (Stambaugh 1990). Because impermanence is central in Zen, it has a process philosophical character. Buddha-nature is enlightened reality or ultimate reality and signifies the true nature of existence. As I also presented in my presentation on Zen Buddhism, realizing the impermanent nature of existence is part of enlightenment. If one also follows Hui-Neng idea that for the novice, which we should see someone who engages in fishing and Zen, it is appropriate to talk about gradual enlightenment (Hui-Neng 2021:83). It follows that the more one becomes in tune with and realizes the impermanent nature of things, the closer one will be to enlightenment. To phrase it differently, the more one accepts, understands, and becomes in tune with the impermanent nature of things, the more fishing becomes a Zen experience.

Making fishing more of a Zen activity will entail that one actively tries to understand the impermanent nature of the things surrounding oneself. Even if one by necessity will understand and gain knowledge about the impermanent nature when fishing, one does not have to engage in impermanence actively. One could go out to the lake and simply fish. That, however, would not
make one into a very good angler. However, I suspect that, through experience, one would still slowly learn a lot about the impermanent nature of the environment one is fishing in.

It also seems like if one becomes more in tune with the impermanent nature of the surroundings, one will become a better fisherman. One will become a better fisherman if one starts understanding the changes in seasons, water temperatures, plant and insect life, fish life, and more. One will become better at predicting the fish’s behavior, adapt to different situations, and thus catch more fish. This is a positive thing and shows that realizing the impermanent nature of existence is positive in both Zen and Fishing. Enlightenment, which should make one fully function at every step of practice (Abe 1991: 67), has a performance-enhancing claim. The same is true for understanding the impermanent nature of fishing. It should improve one’s fishing and thus enhance one’s performance.

The impermanent aspect is another aspect that is not specific to fishing. Everything everywhere changes constantly. How one views things should change if one better understands how things change because one will learn more about the ephemeral aspect of things in existence.

How Zen is helpful to better understand the impermanent aspect, interconnectedness, and the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable remains to be seen. First, however, we must see how the fisherman thinks and acts.

**Zen Intuition and thinking in fishing.**

There is a paradoxical relationship between analytical and intuitive thinking in fishing. As should be clear by now, countless aspects are relevant to the fisherman’s success, and taking them into account will improve one’s fishing. At the same time, fishing is not an intellectual activity, and one does not sit and contemplate these aspects for extended periods of time while fishing. You are just fishing, and many decisions are made quickly and intuitively. If one gets the idea that a slow retrieve of the lure might be the solution to catching a fish, one does not stand there and think about it for ages. You try it out. In this sense, the gap between action and thinking is small. After all, you are out fishing, not contemplating.

The diminished gap between intuitive and analytic thinking stretches out to a diminished gap between thinking and action. There is a privileged position to intuitive thinking and behavior in fishing. Let me explain this point further.
I already stated that the gap between thinking and acting is small in fishing because one thinks and acts more intuitively. For example, when you see a fish hunting on the surface, you switch to a surface lure and throw it to that spot. Even if one contemplates what action to take, one only contemplates briefly. You have also just received tons of information that you do not need to contemplate. You know that at least one fish is hunting. Depending on how it looked when the fish rose to the surface, you can determine what species of fish it is. If it is, for example, a perch, there is a high chance that more perches are hunting. Depending on where in the water the fish were hunting, one can determine if the fish are moving in shallow or deeper areas. The information I have presented is only a tiny sample of the information one will instinctively obtain from the occurrence of a fish hunting on the surface. One does not need to think about this information. One will intuitively know it. The decision to change to a surface-going lure and cast there could be part of a more rational thinking process. With that said, one often just lifts up the rod and casts towards the position where the hunt was happening and thus does not think much at all.

The senses are critical when fishing, and there must be very little space between action and reaction. You want to hone your skills to know what to do and how to react instinctively. This could be phrased in terms of decreasing any mind-body distinction so that both work in unison.

Let me present some examples of the importance of honing instinctive and intuitive thinking and acting where there is a minimum space between mind and body. A clear example can be found in fishing with plastic lures. These lures are usually fish imitations, worms, or other water creatures on the fish’s menu. One has a plastic lure attached to a weighted hook. Then, one throws it out and lets the lure sink to the bottom. When retrieving the line, the lure should bounce on the bottom. During this time fisherman wants to keep contact with the lure so that he feels what is happening on the other end of the line. This effect is achieved through the choice of fishing line. In this case, a braided line is preferred because it is not elastic and thus carries the vibrations from the lure to the rod. The other important aspect is the choice of fishing rod. A sensitive rod made of material that picks up vibrations easily is preferred. When these two aspects are combined, one will feel what is happening at the bottom. Feeling when the lure hits the bottom will provide a clue as to what type of underwater structure one is fishing over. More importantly, one will feel when a fish strikes at the lure so that one knows when to set the hook. When a fish bites on a plastic lure, it will notice that it is not a real fish, and if one does not do a counter strike, the fish will try to spit it out. Thus, setting the hook quickly will be important. Here is an important example of instinctive thinking and acting and the importance of having as little of a mind-body separation when fishing. If one stops and
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thinks one should set the hook when feeling a fish strike, that millisecond might be enough to lose
the fish.

This type of thinking and acting is not only apparent in setting the hook. As already
mentioned, one wants to be able to feel the lure’s movement. This is true for all types of fishing
methods using a lure that you cast out and retrieve. By sensing the lure, you can control it. It will
help you discern the type of bottom structure, if the lure is moving correctly, and many other things.
When fishing from land, even walking is part of this instinctive and intuitive thinking and acting.
When used to walking in the forest, it will not be necessary to stop and think about which way to go
and where to place one’s feet. Instinctively and intuitively, one will walk and make one’s way
through the undergrowth. Surely, sometimes bad decisions are made, and a harder route through the
undergrowth is taken. However, most of the time, one just knows where to go and how to walk. The
same is true for where one stands on the shoreline. Most of the time, one does not need to think
about where you can stand and how to get to specific places. One acts and finds a way. Rarely do
you need to think about where there is enough space for casting with a rod. One knows how much
space one has and adjusts how one casts appropriately to the spot one is casting from. All in all, we
can see that fishing is an activity where intuitive thinking and action take a more prominent role
than many other activities. Indeed, instincts are important in choosing fishing spots, where to cast,
and what lures to use.

What I have described above is reminiscent of the Zen idea of an “undivided mind.” As has
been stated earlier in the thesis, one is practicing with an undivided mind when one acts without
obstruction. Acting without obstruction is the same as not letting the mind and body hesitate or
getting stuck on anything internal or external (Hui-Neng 2021:81-82). It is like acting in a state of
flow or no-mind. One is in a meditative state. As I illustrated above, if one starts to think when one
feels the fish striking at the lure, there is a higher risk that the fish might be lost. This can be
compared to acting with an obstructed mind. However, if one just feels and strikes to set the hook,
acting intuitively and on instinct without letting one’s mind stop to contemplate anything, one is
acting with what Zen calls an undivided mind.

As shown before, the intuitive and instinctive type of thinking and acting is an important
part of fishing and something desired to cultivate. Because of this, we have another important
overlap with Zen here. Actively training this line of thinking and acting when fishing will make the
activity more of a Zen activity.
This leads us to the topic of fishing and meditation because this undivided mind is something achieved in meditation. Let me explore this further.

**Fishing, Zen and meditation.**

Let me repeat some important points about how meditation is understood in Zen. Meditation in Zen is often associated with Zazen or sitting meditation. Zen monk and philosopher Dogen was one of the biggest proponents of Zazen, or seated meditation (Abe 1992:17). If one thinks of meditation as a sitting activity, one would be mistaken. The Za in Zazen means sitting, and Zen means meditation. Thus, even the name implies that Zazen is just a meditation done when seated. It does not exclude the possibility of one being able to meditate in other ways. If we return to the sixth Zen patriarch, Hui-neng, we see this point more clearly. He explains that meditation is an internal state of mind where one is thinking clearly (Hui-Neng 2021:89). He states, “Not to be confused internally is meditation (Hui-Neng 2021:89)”’. To him, Zen meditation was to not be confused by how the outside world appears (Zen) and not being internally confused (Meditation) (Ibid.).

The state of Zen meditation in practice is no-mind. No-mind refers to a state prior to a dualism of mind and body or mind and the world. In this state, one is not an agent in the world but rather part of and connected with it (Suzuki 1996: 262), and one fully functions at every step of practice (Abe 1991: 67). Part of fully functioning is not being deluded, either internally or externally. The distinction between not being internally or externally confused, which Hui-Neng addressed, can be seen as the two aspects of the dualism that need to be absolved to reach no-mind. As I have already shown, the meditative state no-mind describes is the state one is in when enlightened, but one can also be in it in specific practices even if one is not considered enlightened. As I have also shown, the meditative state is also associated with performance enhancement and improved mental health.

Why is this important for fishing? As I already have explored, the fisherman strives for an intuitive state where their mind is undivided. However, if this state is the same as the meditative state of no-mind we can conclude that part of fishing is engaging and striving for a state of meditation. Fishing can then partly be seen as a meditative activity in line with the Zen conception of meditation and no-mind. The more one comes into this state, the better fisherman one should become. Again, highlighting an already existing aspect of fishing will make it more of a Zen
practice. Because this state also makes one a better fisherman, it also points toward the performance-enhancing aspect of Zen.

**Meditation and neuroscience**

The meditative state in fishing and how Zen can help change how one views the environment has an even more central role than one might believe at first glance. No clear methodological advice was presented when covering the previous relevant aspects for infusing Zen into fishing. However, there is a method, and it is meditation. To make this point, we need to take a detour and explore some neuroscientific research.

In neuroscience, it has been revealed that the human brain has two reward modules and one punishment module. These have been evolutionarily developed to help us survive by influencing our moods appropriately (Grinde 2014: 162-163). The reward modules are *seeking* and *consuming*. Their purpose is to give us a positive feeling when pursuing something that will be good for our survival and to enjoy that which we need and is good for us (Grinde 2014: 163).

The punishment module is there to protect us from danger and evolutionary disadvantageous scenarios (Grinde 2014:163). That is, the punishment module is triggered when in immediate danger, like meeting a dangerous animal, and in social situations. Evolutionary-wise, being cast out of your community could mean your death and is thus dangerous. In short, the punishment module is responsible for all the negative responses in the human brain.

The unconscious triggers these modules. However, it is important to note that even if these are unconscious behaviors and impulses, one can consciously influence them. Nevertheless, influencing both the punishment and the reward modules is difficult (Grinde 2014: 171).

Even if the reward modules provide immediate rewards, they should not be seen as keys to a happy life because they only provide short-term pleasures (Grinde 2014:175). The reward modules provide psychological highs, and the punishment modules give psychological lows. What about when neither is activated? When none of these modules are triggered, the human will be contented (Grinde 2014:175). This is important because it means that the default state of humans is a state of contentment. Not only is the human psychological baseline one of contentment, but being in this state has been shown to be essential to long-term happiness (Grinde 2014:175). Because our default state is a state of contentment, increasing the quality of life does not have much to do with pursuing
pleasure but rather avoiding inappropriately activating the punishment module in the brain so one can stay in the default state of contentment (Grinde 2014:175). This is also true for reward modules because they can be triggered in inappropriate situations, like when a nicotine addict wants a cigarette and smokes one. This is an unhealthy behavior, and the reward modules are not activated by what is good for humans. Controlling the reward modules is also important.

It follows that controlling the triggering of the punishment and the reward modules will be good for a happy life. What important aspects influence how the reward and punishment modules are triggered? Let me move on to explore this aspect.

Our environment and industrialized societies

Three factors are relevant to consider when pursuing a happy life. The first and most obvious are the genes of an individual. Unfortunately, your genetic code is nothing you can influence. The genes that one is born with will make you inclined to do better and worse in certain situations. The other two factors are the environment one lives in and the fact that one can train one's mind to better handle situations that unnecessarily trigger the punishment and reward modules (Grinde 2014: 181). These two factors can be influenced. The treatment of phobias through cognitive behavior therapy is an example of how one can train one's brain. One can also place oneself in an environment that is calming. Problems caused by the environment one inhabits are seen as discords. That is, mismatches in how our brain is evolutionary primed to react and the environment lived in cause unnecessary distress (Grinde 2014:186).

A problem for mental health is that, like our physical body, the more exercise your brain gets, the better it becomes in that activity. The brain's capacity to become more efficient in certain activities is not restricted to positive behaviors and responses. This becomes a problem is because the more one activates the punishment module, the better the brain will become at repeating that activity. If one lives in a poor environment, one trains the brain to trigger punishment signals that cause stress, pain, and anxiety (Grinde 2014:188). You will be training the on-switch of the punishment module (Grinde 2014:189). A child with a poor upbringing will train the triggering of the punishment module and thus be more prone to mental health issues.

Grinde points out that in today's industrialized society, we live a comparatively safe and healthy life, but mental issues seem to increase and be a major problem for people in industrialized
societies. Grinde sees the root of this predicament to lie in how we live today; it triggers our punishment module more than in the past and thus causes mental health issues (Grinde 174). This is because evolution has yet to have time to adjust to the rapid societal changes that have happened in the last few hundred years. Because of that, our punishment module gets triggered at inappropriate times, especially for people in the industrialized world.

Grinde also thinks that the way social life functions is a major discord. Evolutionarily, we are primed for life in small, tight groups of people, which creates close social connections. Our modern society strives more for the opposite. Independence, instead of dependence, the quantity of friends is seen as positive even though the quality is psychologically better for our mental health. One is more often put in situations with many strangers than before. These strangers often trigger negative emotions through the punishment module (Grinde 2014:190-191).

What I see as an important point is that the environment one is brought up in will affect how easily negative emotions are triggered due to the brain being exercised in specific ways. Another important point is that there is a discord in the industrialized environment we live in today. It is so different from the environment in which the human species has evolved in that the brain has not evolved to catch up with the societal changes surrounding us. This, in turn, triggers negative responses when they are not warranted. This, however, implies that the environment you live in is important for your mental health. Placing oneself in a more primitive environment that is more similar to how the human species has been living for most of their existence should be a good choice. This conclusion is also supported by some environmental psychologists who claim that one reason why exposure to nature has positive effects on humans' mental health is rooted in the fact that the natural environment is the type of environment humans have evolutionarily adapted to live in (Sahlin 2014:24). Our brains are better equipped to handle this type of environment.

**Strategies to control the triggering of rewards and punishments in your brain**

As has already been stated, there are three main aspects that will have an impact on the quality of life. These aspects are genetics and environment, and that one can train the brain to handle certain situations better. There is nothing one can do about one's genetics. However, the other two aspects are something one can influence. One can adopt strategies related to these aspects to increase the quality of one's life.
One strategy to increase the quality of life is found in positive psychology, where one tries to actively simulate the reward modules and turn off the punishment module. This can include strategies like thinking happy thoughts or diverting your attention from that which causes distress. The key is to avoid stimulating the area of the brain that is responsible for activating negative feedback. With time and less stimulation, that part of the brain should become harder to trigger and learn that it should not be triggered in some situations (Grinde 2014: 204-207).

Meditation is also an important strategy. The main reason why meditation is beneficial is that when one trains to empty the mind of thoughts, one is also training the off-switch of the punishment and reward modules. One is learning to turn off or stop the parts of the brain that cause distress, both physically and mentally (Grinde 2014:213). However, meditation does not necessarily entail completely emptying one's mind. There is the option of completely emptying one's mind or training it to focus on one thing or task. The neurological effects are similar and positive. This could be mindfulness, where one focuses on being present in the moment (Grinde 2014:214) or being in a state of flow or in the state of no-mind. In these states, your mind is not emptied of thoughts. Instead, thoughts flow freely, and one does not stop or get attached to any positive or negative response. In this way, even if the reward or punishment module is triggered, it will also be turned off quickly because the mind does not dwell on the response and is susceptible to new reactions and responses.

Ultimately, creating good habits is essential for a happy life. However, habits are also part of the problem. Bad habits have negative effects, while good habits have positive effects. This is, of course, obvious. Part of the strategy is to steer away from that which triggers negative responses. However, Grinde repeatedly points out that our industrialized society is not favorable in this regard (Grinde 2014:225).

Why are the points addressed above important for my endeavor to see how Zen can provide helpful practices that will change how one views the environment? Let me address this under the following heading. I will return to my example of fishing and clarify what aspects of Zen are the most important to infuse into fishing to make it more of a Zen practice. In the process, we should see more clearly how Zen can help change how one views the environment.
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**Fishing, Zen and your brain.**

We have seen that fishing and Zen share a focus on interconnectedness, impermanence, interdependence, confronting the unknown, unpredictable and uncontrollable, and engagement in meditative activity. If one highlights Zen in fishing, these aspects should be heightened and more actively engaged in. Focusing on these aspects should change how one views the environment because it nurtures an understanding of how things in one's surroundings function and behave. One learns more about the environment one inhabits.

We have also seen that research supports the claim that fishing is good for mental health. The same is true for Zen. Not only is this a claim made by Zen Buddhists, but there is research on Buddhist monks claiming that they are happy people. Indeed, the supposedly happiest man in the world is a Buddhist monk. The critical factor in his happiness was found in the quality of his meditative state (Grinde 2014:167). The mental health aspect should make incorporating these Zen practices into one's life attractive.

**The unknown as training to turn of your punishment modules.**

Part of suffering (*Dukkha*), according to Zen and Buddhism in general, is that things are unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. As we have also seen, neurologically negative feelings are connected with the activation of the punishment module in the brain. The punishment module is also easily triggered and is the cause of both psychological and physical negative feelings (Grinde 2014: 173). If we match this up with the Buddhist idea of *Dukkha*, there is a correlation because the fundamental challenge for humans is to handle their negative feelings and, in this sense, to handle the activation of the punishment module. Zen also thinks negative feelings are easily triggered and ever-present, which is the same as with the punishment module. Because of this correlation, we can now move to the effect of confronting the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable found in fishing to draw more general conclusions about Zen.

Actively engaging with the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable, as one has to do in fishing and can engage in more if desired, can thus be seen as training the off-switch of the punishment module. One important reason for this is the mingling of positivity and negativity. Even if there are a lot of things that can cause distress in fishing, the fishermen enjoy it. By focusing on
the positive part of fishing, one adopts the strategy Grinde presented, where one diverts the focus from the negative to the positive (Grinde 2014: 204-207). This could be a reasonable conclusion, and I’m convinced it is partly the case.

Similarly, in Zen, one should not get stuck on any thought, especially negative ones. Thus, Zen wants you to do something similar to what Grinde suggests. However, what about meditation? As I have already shown, there is a meditative aspect in fishing. It could be more likened to mindfulness, or no-mind, where you act instinctively and flow-like. As we saw, Grinde showed that meditation is an exercise in turning off the punishment and reward modules. In the process of turning off these modules, one returns to the human baseline of contentment. Because meditation helps to return to the human baseline of contentment, the meditative aspect of fishing is likely responsible for handling the possible negative feelings provided by the aspect of the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. Most likely, the meditative part of fishing is responsible for the positive mental health benefits of fishing. It is not unlikely that this is one major reason why research has shown that fishing is good for one’s mental health (Wilson et al. 2023: 306). It is also in training the meditative state that one can make fishing even more of a Zen activity. This also shows that confronting the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable should be combined with meditative activity or state of mind to make fishing a Zen activity.

Because the meditative state Zen strives for is good for mental health, we have one reason why one would want to engage in Zen practice. With this said, both reward modules have a place in fishing. Both in the sense of catching fish and the anticipation. Even so, the majority of time spent on or by the water will be that of not being successful. Fishing is a time-consuming activity. Also, negative, unpredictable, and challenging aspects will appear continuously; thus, it is reasonable to ascribe most of the positive aspects of fishing to turning off the punishment module rather than activating reward modules. However, the rewards when catching a fish will heighten the experience.

There is also an argument to be made about whether one should indulge in positive feelings if one wants to make fishing into a Zen activity. The main reason is that they can backfire and turn into disappointment. Of course, many people are disappointed when fishing. However, the meditative aspect controls these feelings, so if one engages and hones one’s meditative skills, one should be less susceptible to disappointments.
Meditation is the key

It should be clear by now that a state of meditation is central. The categories of interconnectedness, impermanence, the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable do, at least in many ways, correspond with how existence behaves. Getting to terms with this and understanding it has many benefits. Even if these ideas are central to Zen, they should be uncontroversial. These aspects also correspond with the idea of Dukkha, which is seen in Buddhism as the primary human problem. Because of that, Buddhism is also psychological in nature because it helps one live a happy life. The way to happiness is through meditation, both in the form of sitting meditation and, ultimately, in having that state in all activities. Being in this state is the same as not activating or stopping the activation of your reward and punishment modules. However, this is not an issue for gaining a happy life because the baseline for humans is that of contentment. A meditative state is thus crucial to making things into a Zen activity. It also seems to be the reason why it can be incorporated into many worldviews and practices.

Because meditation is a state of mind, it does not get in conflict with the worldviews one holds or what one does. No matter the beliefs or practices performed, one can be in a meditative state. This meditative state is also preferred because it provides a break from troubles and a feeling of contentment. Indeed, it even enhances performance because it hinders one from stopping at distracting thoughts and issues which could be in the way of performing to the best of one’s ability.

The meditative aspect of fishing makes it compatible with Zen’s view of meditation and thus can help in meditative training. All the aspects that connect fishing and Zen are relevant in almost any practice one can engage in. As already mentioned, a meditative state is always attractive to be in, no matter what one does. This ended up being the most important part of making fishing into a Zen experience and could likely be one reason why researchers have found fishing to be good for mental health (Wilson et al. 2023: 306). However, the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable, impermanence and interconnectedness are also always part of life, no matter what one does. A painter can never fully control what s/he is doing; unknown aspects are always present. Maybe the paint is bad. Maybe the brush breaks. That would be unpredictable. There is nothing one can do; at least some small aspects are always unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. One reason is that things are interconnected and impermanent. Everything around oneself always changes and is always connected in both part-whole and causal relations.
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What sets fishing apart from other activities is that it is an activity that often takes place in nature and thus represents a move into a sphere of life one not usually is in, at least for people in the industrialized world. In this way, the affinity between fishing and Zen illustrates the comparability between Zen and practices humans engage in but also the diagnosis that humans have a different relation with nature and its environment than in past times. My example illustrates that Zen can be incorporated into many practices very easily. The key to this is meditation. However, the other aspects are also important.

When saying the key is meditation, we should consider an important point. In Zen, this state is an enlightened state. Because all mental thrash is turned off, you will be able to see the world as clearly as possible, considering your biological disposition and the knowledge you possess. This means that this state will provide you with a deeper understanding of how things work, and the knowledge obtained in it will, ideally, be untainted by your wants, needs, beliefs, and other mental thrash. In this way, meditation is key to understanding and coming to terms with interconnectedness, impermanence, and the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. When I repeatedly stated that I had not yet provided a tool to help one realize interconnectedness and impermanence better and come to terms with the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable, it was because I had not yet fully explored meditation. The meditative state should help view things clearly without preconceived notions and without letting one’s ego get in the way. Thus, it should also help in accurately viewing the environment surrounding oneself and the importance of the things surrounding oneself. Meditation should provide a tool to better and more accurately understand how things are interconnected and impermanent. The meditative state should also help one judge things more accurately because, in that state of mind, one views things clearly.

The potential of Zen

At this stage, it seems like there should not be any problems in incorporating the Zen practices of a meditative mindset into life to psychologically handle what I have described as the unknown, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. This should not be a problem. There should be no issue in engaging and trying to understand how things are interconnected and impermanent. The main reason is that these are not the types of activities that get in conflict with belief systems and, especially in the case of meditation, are shown by science to be good for you. Because the positive
effects of meditation have neuroscientific support, it would be up to those who wish to argue against meditation's positive effects to provide evidence to debunk traditions like Zen and scientific research. The ball is in the court of the one who does not want to believe in the positive effects of meditation to prove it to be wrong. This applies to anyone holding a religious or secular worldview. If they do not like the conclusion that meditation has health benefits, they must prove the contrary. Before that is done, one should accept that meditation has health benefits.

When connecting Zen meditative states with flow psychology and reasoning, I have also concluded that being in a meditative state has performance-enhancing effects. The main reason is that nothing hinders you from accessing the knowledge and skills you possess, and one is not hindered by negative feelings that might hinder one from performing to the fullest of one's abilities. Even less important aspects, like getting a better understanding of how things change and are interconnected, will increase performance because it simply provides one with more knowledge.

The things I have presented thus far should make incorporating Zen into life very attractive. This fulfills the criteria presented in the beginning, where I wanted a good strategy to be attractive to follow. It makes one perform better and have a happier life. What is not to love? These practices are focused on such fundamental human aspects that they need not be in conflict with the worldview one holds and can be incorporated into all types of practices. Unfortunately, it is never that easy. There is a final and important argument to be made. Does Zen practice help change how one views the environment without demanding one to adopt its panpsychist worldview? This is important because it could derail my entire argument in this thesis. Let's explore this further.

Imagine a person who does not believe in panpsychism or non-dualism and holds a secular worldview. This person would not have any of the ideas that Zen or panpsychism provide. However, this person starts to nurture a meditative state and is also not against understanding how things change over time. After all, some interconnectedness and impermanence are part of secularized worldviews. How would things change? The key can be taken from neuroscience. Because meditation helps you turn off punishment and reward modules, one effectively turns off what might be in the way of seeing things clearly. It will also make one more resilient in challenging situations and thus less afraid of making hard decisions. A couple of things should happen. First, one should become better at appreciating the surroundings and more clearly see the value it holds. For a person with an objectifying view of nature, this would mean getting an increased sense of their value and nurturing a different relationship with nature. It should also help one accept the facts that confront oneself and make the decision to do something for the
environment easier. On top of all of this, there is the advantage that one, in the process, should become more content with the life one lives due to the positive effects that meditation provides. Especially considering our industrialized society's situation, where Grinde argues that these aspects have become more pressing than ever. Thus, as an extra candy, one also has the tools to live a more fulfilling life in the society that we have in the industrialized world. In short, because meditation helps to see things clearly, one will start to see and judge the surroundings more appropriately. Because meditation also makes it easier to handle hard situations by providing tools to handle difficult emotions, it should be easier to make the more difficult decisions that will help remedy the environmental problems that are facing humanity.

How would it be for a Christian person? For the Christian, I cannot see much difference; one could still go to church, worship God, and, at the same time, nurture a meditative mindset and state of approaching the world, which will provide a clearer understanding of how the world works, especially for nature in today's society because this is an area that is neglected. One does not have to subscribe to panpsychism, even if one could in the form of, for example, theological panpsychism. In the end, meditation aims to help yourself through meditation and reap the fruits that are a clearer view of the world one lives in and a happier life where one lives out one's potential.

There is seemingly a big issue for my argument. One can argue that one need not follow the insights from Zen to come to my conclusions. This would potentially be a problem for Zen and especially for my thesis. Does one really need to follow Zen? One could just start meditating and learn from insights provided by, for example, neuroscience.

First of all, as long as you have the right insights, Zen does not seem to care which path one takes. Thus, taking the road of just following science is not necessarily an issue as long as it leads to a more enlightened view of things. In a way, this would be to follow Zen. This statement might seem strange; however, it should not be taken lightly. The story of how Hui-Neng became the sixth patriarch is told in the platform sutra. This is an essential narrative because it shows how Hui-Neng ends up being the most clear-sighted person and thus the one worthy of becoming the successor of the fifth patriarch, even though he lacked Buddhist training (Hui-Neng 67-76). This is an important story because it clearly shows that Zen does not have an issue with how people reach enlightenment; enlightenment itself is important. Thus, It is not an issue if you come to the same conclusion as Zen by following a path that is provided by other practices, thoughts, and disciplines. Thus, You could follow science and relevant philosophies instead of Zen without it being a problem for Zen.

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The question still remains whether one should learn from Zen when any way that leads to an enlightened view of things is valid. One reason can be found in Leidenhag's critique of panpsychism, where she states that panpsychism does not provide any value system to follow and thus ends up in an "every man for himself" philosophy (Leidenhag 2022: 147). Zen does provide a value system to follow. A value system that values practice and how one engages with one's surroundings very highly. Further, Zen and Buddhism have perfected the art and practice of meditation for over two thousand years. Instead of starting from scratch, one can build on this already refined practice. Why reinvent the wheel?

Ultimately and most importantly, I do not argue that everyone should become Zen Buddhist, just that there are insights we can get from turning to Zen. These insights will be especially helpful in today's society, where problems arise from how one views the environment.

Summary

I set out to see in which way Zen Buddhism could provide practices that could help remedy the environmental problems that may arise from how the environment is viewed. My aim was to show that Zen Buddhism can provide helpful practices in dealing with the environmental problems that arise from how the environment is viewed. I then claimed that a good approach to this problem should be practical, where practice leads to the changing of one’s view. I also presented the criteria that a good practical approach should not be in conflict with the worldview one has and be attractive to follow.

I have now shown that it is attractive to pursue the meditative state that Zen advocates - a state that can be maintained in all practices - because it provides health benefits, is performance-enhancing, and helps in viewing things in existence clearly. I have also shown that the meditative state in Zen helps in controlling emotions, which are responsible not only for the health benefits but should also make it easier to make hard decisions because one will have the tools to handle negative emotions. Furthermore, because the Zen meditative state helps control emotions and helps one see things clearly, it will result in viewing the environment more accurately without preconceived notions.
I argued that Zen advocates an active engagement in how things are interconnected and impermanent and to confront the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. Because these aspects are always part of one’s life, engaging more in them should not be too hard. Engaging in interconnectedness and impermanence should also be beneficial because it provides one with better knowledge about the surroundings, which should lead to a more environmentally friendly view, regardless of the worldview one holds. To actively confront and come to terms with the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable should also be beneficial. I argued that meditation is beneficial because its emotion-controlling effects make it easier to confront and come to terms with the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. Because meditation also makes one view things more clearly, it should also make one better understand how things are interconnected and impermanent.

Another reason why this approach is attractive is because Zen does not propose that you change too much in your life. When incorporating a pursuit of a meditative state and an attitude to understand how things are interconnected and impermanent, you will be focusing on things that are already part of life. Interconnectedness, impermanence, and the unknown, uncontrollable, and unpredictable are ever-present aspects of life. Focusing on these activities is just a small change in what one values as important in experience. Incorporating meditation does not change what is already part of life. One only introduces a tool that will help to perform better and feel better. It is a refocusing of the mindset one should pursue in the activities performed.

The other essential criterion for my approach to be successful was that it should not get into any major conflicts with the worldview one held. I argued that focusing on impermanence and interconnectedness does not get into conflict with a person’s worldview because focusing on these aspects is never bad; on the contrary, it should be beneficial because it helps us understand the world we live in. Pursuing the Zen meditative state also does not get in conflict with your worldview because it is just pursuing a state of mind. One does not have to change one’s worldview to pursue a state of mind. I supported my argument for the benefits provided by the meditative state by turning to neuroscience. This also gave further support for why the aspects of Zen that I have highlighted in this thesis do not conflict with the worldview held by the practicing individual. If one wanted to argue against meditation, one would have first to prove the neuroscientific results about meditation to be wrong.

To pursue the meditative state that Zen advocates and nurture an attitude that wants to understand how things are interconnected and impermanent and to deal with the unknown,
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unpredictable, and uncontrollable should thus help in changing how one views the environment for the better.
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