ZEN

above the Tea Fields

"In the Dojo"

First Act of the Book

ZEN

above the Tea Fields

"In the Dojo"

Reto Ray Schaffer

ZEN in Three Acts (Book I-III)

ZEN

above the Tea Fields

"In the Dojo"

ZEN

above the Tea Fields

„Mephisto"

ZEN

above the Tea Fields

„Posthuman"

Act I

Welcome to this theatre without a stage

Here,
Tao and ZEN meet,
stories and silence.

Love and emptiness,
human, machine,
and that which is beyond everything.

If you recognise non-duality not as a teaching,
but as a quiet smile—
then you are,
whoever you are,
absolutely right here.

Sikkim near Temi

Intro

The Return of Master Do

Do was born in the hills of Temi in southern Sikkim—where tea leaves kiss the morning mist and the light falls through only in broken strands.

His village lay between moss and rain, little more than a dozen houses. A place where damp hung in the air, the howl of wind, and bird calls were the only measure of time.

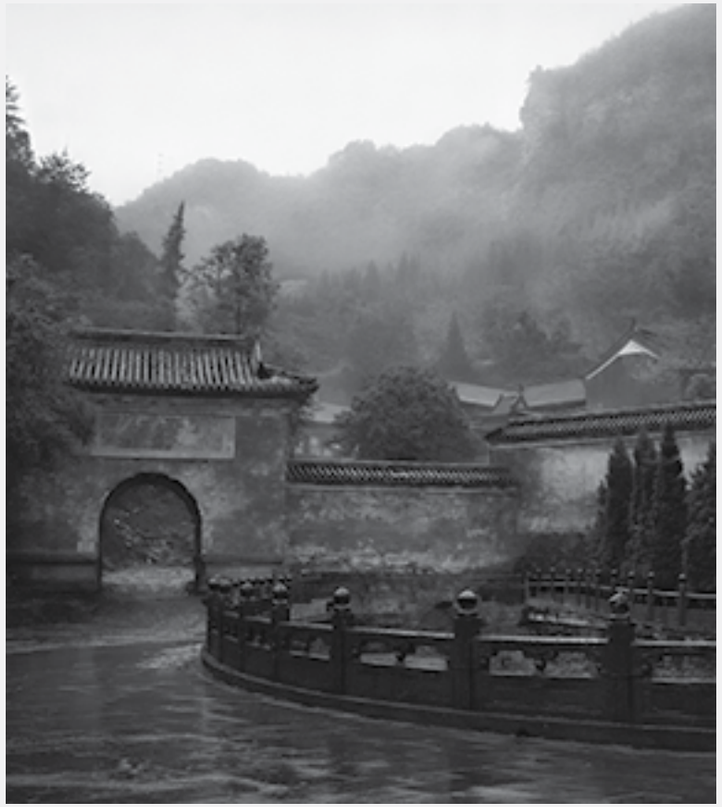
Twenty-three years later, Do returned to the hut of his long-deceased parents.
Yet today he seemed changed — still familiar, and yet no longer the same.
The roof had sagged slightly; the wood was still as grey as his memory

Sikkim near Temi

had kept it. Only the smoke from the clay stove still smelled of childhood.

His sister still lived near Temi—
a delicate, weather-hardened woman who, with roots, herbs, and quiet hands, helped the villagers forget their aches, or at least gave them a name.

The tea slopes above the village were in full bloom. Today, for once, Do did not drink tea. He only breathed in the leaves—as if scent alone could set the world in motion again. Between birth and return lay the wide, pathless road of emptiness, and a time that had long since taken its leave.



Wudang, China

He had lived in the Wudang Mountains,

Where clouds drift like thoughts above temple roofs, where masters stand unnoticed in the shade of ancient pines, and silence itself becomes perfected movement.

There, in the mist between the monasteries, he found his teacher: a small man whose quiet laughter did not disturb the stillness, but brightened it—like the clear ring of a bell.

He was as at home in the Tao as he was in Quan,
moved as if every gesture were a parable,
and, in his free, non-disciplining way, often said:
“Whoever goes looking for the stick-strike has already missed it.”

In the evenings, he would sometimes vanish without a trace. If you

Wudang, China

asked him where he had been, he would answer: “Circling above the valleys—as a bird of prey, as a crow, or a small songbird—counting the stars that have lost their way in humanity’s sky.”

Many, however, whispered that in truth he visited the pleasure districts of Shiyan—where the smoke was sweeter than the women, but the toothless laughter was direct and honest. Do knew nothing of his master’s parallel lives—and for Do it made no difference anyway. To him his master remained exalted, no matter how he behaved, regardless of what rumours coiled around him. Do had learned that truth lives neither in words, nor in rumours, nor in actions, nor in seriousness.

Eiheiji in Japan

Later he went to Japan, to the temple of Eiheiji.

There, the winter light clung thickly to wood and stone, and every step sounded like a bow. He hardly spoke. He sat the way others breathe: lingering in emptiness. He didn't think—he only listened, for as long as it took until even listening, the mind, the whole inner static, fell away.

Do was a very conscientious student. Many of his fellow monks crept out of the monastery at night to amuse themselves with prostitutes. Do was not prudish, but he took his task very seriously—far too seriously. In time he realised that this seriousness was crushing him completely on his spiritual journey. He had to lay it down. It happened so radically that it freed him entirely: headlong he left the monastery and returned home.

His reputation reached Temi before he did—yet the one it referred to

Eiheiji in Japan

was no longer there. Whoever returns to their village after twenty-three years finds only a few who still know them. And yet: the reunion was wonderful. The earth recognised his steps, and the tea plants inclined—not out of reverence, but because they knew they would soon be picked. Do was happy at home. In himself, as in Sikkim. He taught a few impoverished students free of charge; in return they helped him chop wood, cook, clean, and do all the small tasks that make a life more pleasant.

The old student's Hut

One of Do's students was a somewhat older pupil from Europe. He had already been living for several years in a modest hut in Sikkim. From time to time he went home for a few months to earn money, as he once explained to Do.

The conversations in this book (Act 1) are based on the conversations between Do and his oldest student.

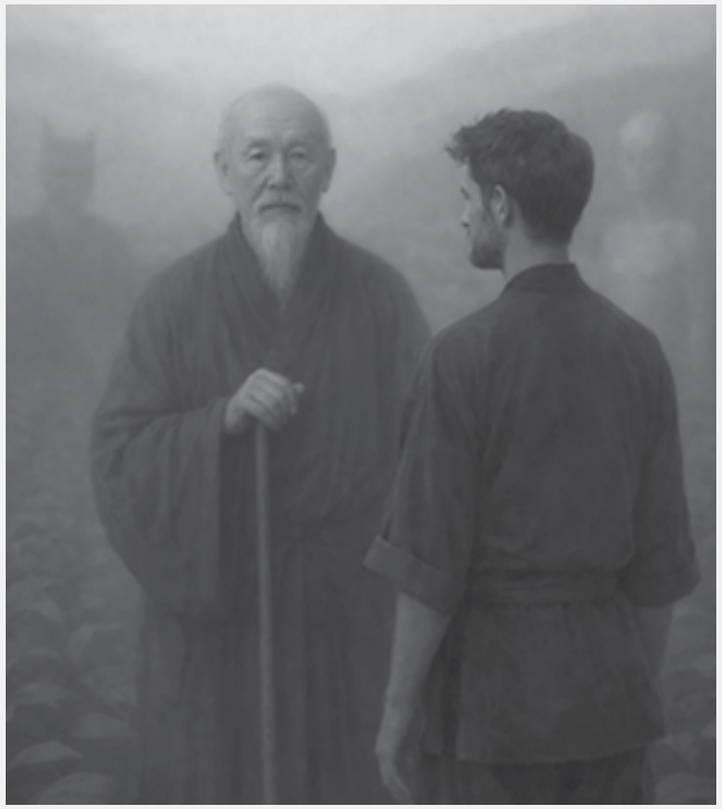
The pages to come convey no actual teachings, no answers and no viewpoints.
Questions appear; answers evaporate.

There is neither master nor student—only a happening.

Nothing truly happens, and yet everything is: suchness.

Nothing is like everything—and even THAT, in its is-ness, is utterly empty.

The dialogues are not preserved. They simply happen, spoken by no one.



The protagonists

The Cast

Act 1

Master Do — still as a mountain, deeply rooted in Sikkim.
The students — seekers from the region; and Ron, a student in his early thirties from Europe, who had already lived in Sikkim for several years.

Act 2

Master Do — the same stillness, but with a fine, surprising humour.
The students — a small circle from Sikkim — and Ron, whose conscience suddenly starts to speak up.
Mephisto — Ron's conscience or thought-loops: mocking, alert, unapologetically honest; a voice that jumps back and forth between inner world and stage.

Act 3

Do, Ron, Mephisto — and reality becomes even more porous.
The ETs — visitors from elsewhere: perhaps conquerors, perhaps merely curious about the master.
The Data Unit — a feminine-seeming robotic unit, coupled to the Earth's energy centres—and at the same time networked intergalactically.

Master and Students in front of the Dojo

Prologue

The first questions rise like the scent of cedar—empty thought-images that, as if by a spell, find a voice and are spoken into the room.

Master Do's answers sink into the silence, as though they were dripping into a bowl.

There is no beginning, no intention, no goal—
only the play of emptiness and illusion.

Who hears? Who asks? Who speaks?
Everything is only a single happening.
There are only these wind-whispered words in the room — and yet:

a stillness that—
who can believe it—
seemingly carries everything,
but in its suchness knows nothing of it,
shining only with absence.

On a foggy Sunday afternoon

Q: “How do I find the right perspective for life?”

A: “By losing every one.”

Q: “So that is the true perspective—having none?”

A: “That, too, would already be a perspective again.”

Q: “But then nothing is left!”

A: “Yes. And not even that.”

Dialogue 1

Q: “How can I get to where you are?”

A: “There is no one—and nowhere can be found as a place.”

Q: “So there’s no path to walk?”

A: “…and no one thinks about it.”

Dialogue 2

Q: “How can I overcome ‘my’ lost self?”

A: “Only an (I-)assumption tries to do that—apparently.”

Q: “And if the illusory self disappears?”

A: “Who would still have anything to worry about?”

Dialogue 3

Q: “Is non-duality a truth?”

A: “At most—for the one who still believes they’re the one asking.”

Q: “And if no one asks?”

A: “Then only silence remains.”

Dialogue 4

Q: “But there has to be something, right?”

A: “Something — but for whom?”

Q: “So there is none?”

A: “Drink your tea.”

(D. hesitates briefly, then quietly):

A. “And who, exactly, wants to know?”

Dialogue 5

Q: “How can I experience THAT?”

A: “The idea of wanting to experience something smells of duality.”

Q: “So is experience impossible at all?”

A: “Perhaps experience happens… but for whom?”

Ron had always imagined his “I” as a phoenix.
But that image was dying now.
Nothing could ever rise again—
at best, it could burn itself in the fire, if anything ever truly burned at all.

Dialogue 6

Q: “Who actually understands this message?”

A: “There is neither a message nor a listener.”

Q: “And if I truly understand it?”

A: “There simply isn’t anyone there who could understand—or experience—anything.”

Dialogue 7

Q: “Is there even such a thing as realization?”

A: “Only as long as someone believes they can have it.”

Q: “And what if this ‘having’ is transcended?”

A: “Realization doesn’t need an illusory mirror to ‘realize itself’ (yet again).”

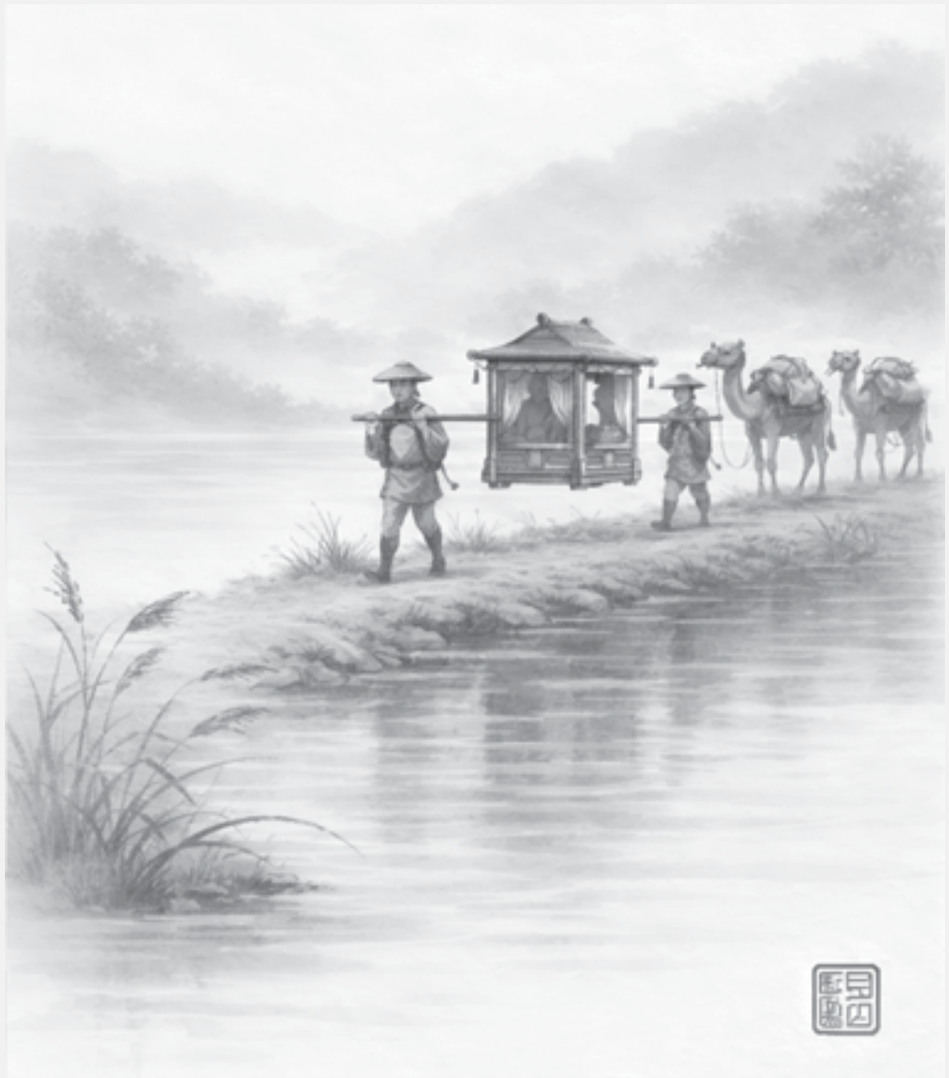
Dialogue 8

Q: “Can I surrender to THAT?”

A: “Only a clouded mind believes it can surrender to THAT.”

Q: “Could my self and my surrender dissolve as well?”

A: “Perhaps. Ultimately, an event for no one.”



Dialogue 9

Q: “What is the meaning of life?”

A: “It’s pointless to speak of meaning. The All only seems to happen.”

Q: “And if the sense-mind dissolves?”

A: “No self, no meaning, no mind, no emptiness, no nothing.”

Dialogue 10

Q: “Is there such a thing as freedom?”

A: “Only if you take yourself to be unfree.”

Q: “And if the thought of freedom no longer torments me?”

A: “Without an ‘I,’ freedom is just an empty word.”

Dialogue 11

Q: “So I am neither a self nor a being?”

A: “The one who asserts anything is the self—and yet even that doesn’t exist.”

Q: “If there is no self and no being, who or what experiences THIS? Does it experience itself?”

A: “Self and experience are just an event.”

Q: “Why do I experience them as separate?”

A: “That only happens when you fish in the murky veil of duality.”

“Master, now I really did hear a sound,” says the student. Do laughs heartily and says, dryly: “Yes. Hear the dog.” (In the background, something growls softly to itself.)

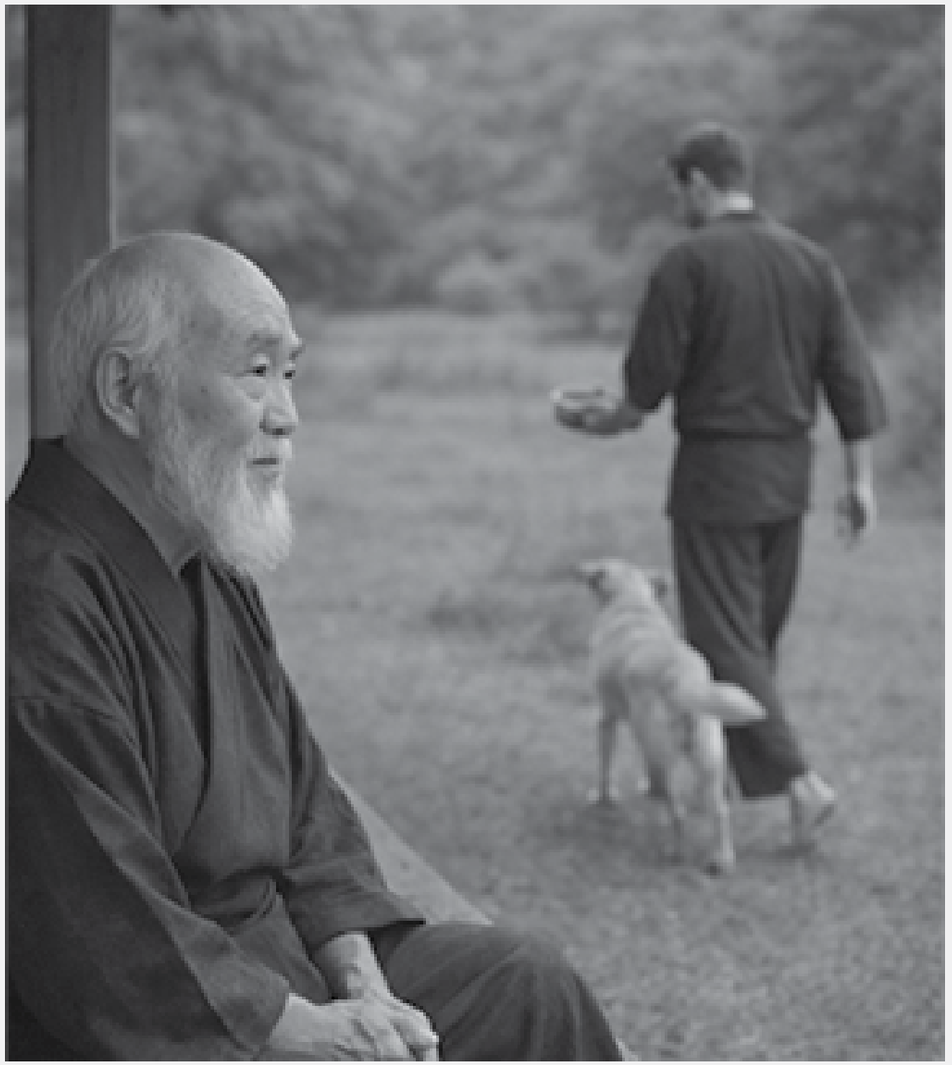
Dialogue 12

Q: “Is this—being free of a self—some kind of state?”

A: “States. Happenings. Assumptions. For no one.”

Q: “And what remains in the end?”

A: “No self, no state, no nothing.”



Ron thought it had to be the dog that had recently wandered in. Do and Ron had to pause—the dog was clearly very hungry or thirsty. Ron stopped the recording on his phone.

"I'll take care of the dog," he said, and disappeared to fetch the bowl.

For a moment, the dojo held its breath. Rain kept tapping the bamboo outside, steady and indifferent. The dog hovered near the threshold, too thin, too alert—watching hands, watching faces, unsure what came next.

Do wondered why, after all these years, Ron still kept turning up at his dojo. Apparently he liked it here more than he ever let on—more than his jokes were willing to admit.

Ron still couldn't hear that Nothing between the master's empty lines—and still he returned, again and again, drawn by that strange, quiet closeness.

Stranger still were his thoughts: they commented without pause—loud, willful, as if they were determined to be the soundtrack of his life.

A truly peculiar fellow, this European.
But Do liked him. Ron brought movement into the day, and

he asked questions that sometimes tore something open
instead of merely smoothing it over—and that shortened the days.

Ron came back. “Where had we left off?”
Neither of them knew.

“I can quickly check on my phone,” Ron offered.
“Leave it,” said Do. “We’ll just begin with a new Twelve.”
They both laughed. “Let’s do that.”
Ron pressed the record button, and the conversation slipped,
effortlessly, back into its current…

Resuming the conversation
Do and Ron simply continue—starting a new *Dialogue 12*.

Dialogue 12

Q: "Does the self live in a simulation?"

A: "Hm. There is no self, no 'me'—and no happening for anyone."

Q: "And for the selfless one?"

A: "There is no such one."

Q: "So who witnesses the world?"

A: "No one."

Q: "And what remains?"

A: "A mountain. A chair …"

Q: "So it is some kind of simulation after all?"

A: (smiles)

Dialogue 13

Q: “Will clarity ever appear?”

A: “Maybe—when no one hears anything anymore, understands anything, or expects anything.”

Q: “And if this self one day does nothing at all?”

A: “Then no one needs clarity anymore.”

Dialogue 14

Q: “Can the unnameable emptiness be taught and heard?”

A: “There’s no one who could learn, teach, or do anything else.”

Q: “So why do you speak?”

A: “Speaking happens without a speaker. Hearing happens without a hearer. And yet everything is just an ununderstood happening.”

Dialogue 15

Q: “Why do inclinations drive me to seek?”

A: “It only appears that way. There is no one being driven, and no seeking.”

Q: “Why do I still feel like a seeker?”

A: “Who can understand that? But tell me—have you ever seen a seeker?”

Dialogue 16

Q: “What is this consciousness?”

A: “The claim—‘I am’—an empty dream.”

Q: “And what lies behind it?”

A: “An empty nothing.”

Dialogue 17

Q: “Am I, then, just an illusion?”

A: “Illusion — that’s just an assumption too.”

Q: “So is my self an assumption?”

A: “Maybe — but only for the one who believes there is illusion and reality.”

Q: “So: am I real or not?”

A: “Not even unreal.”

Dialogue 18

Q: “Can the absence of separation be experienced?”

A: “Experience already presupposes an illusory separation.”

Q: “So there is no experience — even if it feels like I’m experiencing it?”

A: “Who would experience it, if no one is there?”

Q: “So without separation — without the idea of duality — is everything merely a happening… of Nothingness?”

A: “No persona. No experience, no not-experiencing — not even ‘Nothingness’.”

Dialogue 19

Q: “When are we at the end of our journey?”

A: “Who is ‘we’—and who believes this journey ever began?”

Q: “But why do I believe in a beginning and an end?”

A: “Because THIS can also appear—as an assumption.”

Dialogue 20

Q: “Can knowledge be possessed?”

A: “Perhaps someone believes that—but there is no one.”

Q: “Can I truly behead myself?”

A: “You haven’t even asserted yourself.”

Q: “What knowledge do you convey?”

A: “None. THAT is everything—and no one understands it or receives anything.”

Dialogue 21

Q: “Are appearances real?”

A: “Neither real nor unreal—they simply arise, for no one.”

Q: “But who is asking the questions here?”

A: “Not worth mentioning.”

Q: “And what is mind?”

A: “A wind that knows nothing of its blowing.”

Dialogue 22

Q: “What exactly is this capitalized THAT?”

A: “Neither THIS nor THAT.”

Q: “And what does that mean?”

A: “Nothing — or ALL-THAT — remains boundlessly free, even within every assumption, claim, and attribution.”

Q: “And what remains in the end?”

A: “Only THAT — because THIS and THAT have no knowledge of their appearance.”

Dialogue 23

Q: “What are beings?”

A: “Soap bubbles made of emptiness.”

Q: “Is the unknown hidden?”

A: “Nothing is hidden. Emptiness appears even as fullness.”

Q: “Can thoughts veil THAT?”

A: “Even veiling is THAT.”

Dialogue 24

Q: “So, what are we?”

A: “THAT.”

Q: “Is it personal?”

A: “It seems so. But it isn’t.”

Q: “Is it life?”

A: “Y… no. Not describable.”

Q: “And what remains?”

A: “Only THAT — with or without a name, apparently.

Dialogue 25

Q: “Does emptiness exist?”

A: “If it existed, it wouldn’t be empty.”

Q: “Is there something or nothing?”

A: “Neither — only THAT, for no one.”

Q: “And cause and effect?”

A: “Not two, not one — neither separate nor graspable.”

Q: “So truth does exist after all?”

A: “Only as a word or a story. There is simply only THAT.”

Dialogue 26

Q: “Is chaos the opposite of order?”

A: “Only within a supposedly dual way of thinking.”

Q: “So chaos isn’t something threatening?”

A: “Only if you reach for illusory ground.”

Q: “Then what is it, really?”

A: “Nothing. Zero. Neither something nor nothing.”

Q: “But doesn’t the One awaken out of the Zero?”

A: “It may seem so — but for whom would that be true?”

Dialogue 27

Q: “Is there illusion?”

A: “Only in the theatre — in the seeker’s dream.”

Q: “And what is karma?”

A: “A simple story for complex conditions.”

Q: “So in a way, there is something like karma?”

A: “Only for an assumed self.”

Q: “And if all assumptions and conditions fall away?”

A: “Whatever may seem to happen: THIS, what IS, remains.”

Dialogue 28

Q: “And if all assumptions are erased—what remains then?”

A: “The tea grows cold … nothing and everything. Nothing needs to be explained—everything only seems to happen.”

Q: “So this life-film still keeps running, doesn’t it?”

A: “For a self, it may appear that way—but no one could witness THIS.”

One of Do's favorite poets was **Li Po (699–762)**. Ron didn't know why, but Po's poems were scattered all over the house—probably from Do's time in Wudang. Or maybe, Ron suspected, Do kept them as a quiet tribute to his old master, who, as Do once confided, used to quote Po often.

Li Po

Mortal are we all down here.
Doesn't wine entice you at all?
Think of the ancestors, my friend –
they long ago departed from the world.

We have forgotten
the old worries,
and a hundred bowls of wine
still won't quench our thirst.
The night leans
toward conversations among friends,
and in the moon's glow
sleep keeps its distance,
until – without warning –
for us, grown weary,
the earth becomes our bed,
and the sky our covering cloth.

Epilogue

The tea had gone cold long ago, and no one had cared. In the dojo the air stood still—and why should it have circulated: the fan, that small, weary propeller of worldly order, had been dead for days. Master Do cleared the bowls away slowly, almost indifferently; not from tiredness, rather from that old familiarity: things happen, hands move, and the day shuts its door as if it had never opened it.

Ron stayed seated a moment too long. Not dramatically. Just one heartbeat more than necessary—though: necessary for whom? The floor beneath him was the same as before the conversation, the walls the same, the light the same gentle illusion. And yet something kept glowing in the afterheat: that damned feedback loop of questions he never should have needed to ask.

He knew it. Knew every facet of it. That every answer is only a new loop. That every "understanding" is merely a neatly wrapped delay. That what IS needs no confirmation—and certainly no language. And still he had asked. Not because he didn't know, but because something in him… or rather: because something through him… no: because IT kept playing the same film again and again. Yes—simply because it happened that way. Scene by scene. Sentence by sentence. As if life had to hear itself, to keep itself real in its own echo.

Ron stood up. His left knee cracked, as always, softly to itself. His body remembered the rockslide. He'd barely made it out alive—just a few months ago. Whatever. He walked out into the garden with no goal, no plan—and precisely in that he could feel how the plan inside this matrix kept running anyway, fine and stubborn, like an invisible thread.

Gravel crunched under his soles. Somewhere an insect rasped its tiny song. Evening lay over the stones like a soft cloth—only no one had hung it there.

"Trapped in the life-film, however it's written," he thought—and almost laughed at the irony: even that sentence belonged to the same matrix. Even this laughter: it all simply happened. Even the unease: happening. And there wasn't even someone who could truly be affected. It played itself out, yes. It played itself—for him, or for that self that never was.

He stopped and looked at a mountain in the distance. Or maybe just a darker line on the horizon. The ridge stood there in absolute indiffer-

ence, magnificently uninvolved. Simply mountain. Free of meaning. No message. No mirror. And yet—how brazenly soothing that was. As if something were saying: Look. Not because you must look. But because looking seems to happen.

Ron breathed out as if he'd tried to hold on to something for a moment—and as if the breath had reminded him that holding on never works. For one uninvolved moment there was only this being, this presence, this suchness: footsteps, cold on the skin, the chirping, the deepening dark. No task. No goal. No "spiritual progress." Only what is happening anyway.

And then… almost imperceptibly… a shadow that didn't quite follow along.

Not behind him, not ahead of him. More beside the thought—as if a small door had been left a crack open, behind it something waiting with a crooked grin. Nothing visible. No figure. Just a hint of mockery, like an unsolicited clearing of the throat inside—something you hadn't invited and that nevertheless has long been sitting at the table.

Ron felt it and knew exactly what it was: a loop good for nothing. Only commenting, producing questions and answers. An old, tough habit of the mind—forming one more "Yes, but…"—losing itself in commentary loops, not out of malice, perhaps simply out of a taste for the game. A taste for appearing on a stage. But even that was already almost too much of an assumption.

Something in Ron fell quiet.

He kept walking. His sneakers crunched in duet with the gravel beneath his feet. The dojo lay behind him like a closed chapter that still didn't quite want to close. And somewhere in that invisible fold between silence and commentary, between mountain and meaning, between THAT and the attempt to possess something empty, the next act was already waiting.

Not as a threat. More as consequence without a cause.

The evening grew darker. Barely past six—and pitch black. And whatever would come next was already somewhere, quietly clearing its throat.