

See the Stone Buddha Dance



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“When you achieve enlightenment, you will see the stone Buddha dance!” Unlike many Zen koans, I take this one quite literally. Zen aims at a sudden intuitive enlightenment that consists entirely, I think, in raw immediate awareness; in being fully and exclusively present in the moment. In the present moment things are very different than they appear in ordinary awareness, which consists of memories bound to expectations by abstractions. Consider your own conception of life and death, identity and worth, success and failure, love, hate, fear, complex derivatives and all your drama. In the present moment every personal and social construct evaporates because these things only exist *over* time and not at any point *in* time, where we actually live. Enlightenment penetrates all illusion,

and it happens only in the present moment.

In the present moment the stone Buddha does not dance alone. Actually *everything* dances in our visual field simply because our head is shaking and turning all over the place, and because our eyeballs are constantly quivering at the rate of about 70 saccades per second in order to distribute the incoming light evenly over the retinal surface. Were our eyes ever to stop quivering we would go blind in a few seconds. The incoming image of the stone Buddha is indeed dancing all over your visual field, as you will notice if you pay close attention to what you are *actually* seeing as you read this. You may find this sort of raw awareness to be disconcerting, as I find my occasional awareness of “eyeball floaters” in my intraocular fluid. We have a lot of sophisticated cognitive equipment upstream from the eyeball that gives us the filters and the steady field of vision we normally experience. We accept this hallucination as a direct view of the external world, but it is nothing of the sort.

The visual hallucination we take for eyesight shields us from a fragmented and jittery reality so that we can identify predators and mating partners in time to take appropriate action. Most of the time it is convenient *not* to see the stone Buddha dance. Similar cognitive machinery also summarizes everything else that we care about in the world. Call it consciousness if you like, or virtual reality. In every domain, we construct a useful hallucination about the world and take it for reality. We wouldn’t be able to function if we didn’t do this. All truly *is* illusion, which is why there is no knot in your life that cannot be untied. Call me.

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