The Psychology of Self-Surrender: A Contemplative-Hermeneutic Study

Danny Sharara

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF-SURRENDER: A CONTEMPLATIVE-HERMENEUTIC STUDY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Danny Sharara

August 2018
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF-SURRENDER: A CONTEMPLATIVE-HERMENEUTIC STUDY

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ABSTRACT

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF-SURRENDER: A CONTEMPLATIVE-HERMENEUTIC STUDY

By
Danny Sharara
August 2018

Dissertation supervised by William Adams, Ph.D.

This dissertation examines the psycho-spiritual significance of self-surrender as a mode of being and experiencing. The author seeks to generate meaningful knowledge of self-surrender through a methodology that follows from the distinct nature of self-surrender as a psycho-spiritual/religious phenomenon that is grounded in direct experience. As such, this study draws on an integrative methodology that synthesizes elements of applied hermeneutics with autoethnography and contemplative practice. The author conducts an applied hermeneutic analysis of two psycho-spiritual texts; one that is rooted in the Zen Buddhist tradition and the other from the Sufi tradition. This is followed by a thematic analysis that identifies common themes between the texts as well as a reflexive hermeneutic analysis of meaning structures found in both texts. Finally, the discussion section examines the broader psycho-spiritual, existential, relational, and clinical significance of self-surrender.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

One of the central tenets of human science psychology is the recognition that all psychotherapeutic perspectives are underpinned by certain assumptions regarding human nature. These assumptions include implicit beliefs concerning the nature of selfhood, the relationship between the mind and body, and the causes of psychological illnesses, as well their cures. Despite strong currents of scientific positivism that continue to move the field of psychology towards reductive materialism, there is growing interest in the psychology of spirituality. Within mainstream psychology, this interest has largely been limited to Eastern contemplative practices, as can be seen with the development of mindfulness-based approaches to psychotherapy and the interface between meditation and neuroscience (Cahn & Polich, 2006; Lutz et al., 2007, Tang et al., 2015; Epstein, 1990; Hayes et al., 2006; Linehan, 1993).

The research methodologies for such studies have tended to rely heavily on quantification and controlled experimentation. Where qualitative research was used, the subjects have almost always been laypersons with little to no prior experience with contemplative practice (Christopher et al., 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2007). Although this research has made significant contributions to our understanding around the psychotherapeutic potential of meditation and contemplative practices, much of the contemporary research has ignored, simplified, or distorted the broader cultural contexts, ontologies and epistemologies from which these practices have emerged (Ditrich, 2016). Moreover, scholarly and clinical interest in the application, operationalization, and in some cases, commodification of contemplative practices resulted in reductionist understandings of the goals and ideals envisioned by the founders and preservers of the world’s
religious/spiritual traditions (Neale, 2011).

The issue here is not one of clinical efficacy, since these practices have proven effective across multiple domains; relieving stress/anxiety, the treatment of addiction, and the treatment of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Rather, the problem with the psychological appropriation of spiritual practices is that these practices have often been decontextualized from the ontologies, epistemologies, and spiritual aspirations from which they originated (Ditrich, 2016). By virtue of both the reductionist methods used to study these practices (i.e. quantitative/experimental science), as well as through the ontological and epistemological decontextualization of these practices, the field of psychology remains largely oblivious to the transformations of self that these practices were developed to catalyze. The result has been a narrowing of understanding around the full psycho-spiritual implications of these practices and the spiritual worldviews they correspond to.

Given that these methods are useful in relieving human suffering, and that the relief of human suffering is the primary concern of the world’s great religious traditions, where is the problem in their being simplified and decontextualized, provided they are still clinically effective? The difficulty here is that the world’s spiritual traditions offer much broader and multifaceted understandings of the nature of human suffering and the meaning and significance of health and wellness. In any case, the point of view being advanced here is not that these practices are not useful as clinical tools, but rather that something important is lost when contemplative practices and the traditions from which they emerged are viewed in a narrowly instrumental, rather than culturally sensitive way. Another way to express this point is that traditional spiritual practices have been taken up by the field of psychology in many ways, and for mostly legitimate reasons. However, the transposition of these practices onto
the field of psychology has also led to the original psycho-spiritual significance of these practices being largely overlooked.

It is also important to mention here that there have been some efforts within the field of psychology to engage with both contemplative practices and religious/spiritual traditions non-reductively. The field of transpersonal psychology as a whole embodies these efforts, and although it is difficult to concisely define the boundaries and aims of this emergent field, a working definition is provided by Lajoi & Shapiro (1992): “Transpersonal psychology is concerned with the study of humanity’s highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness” (Lajoi & Shapiro, 1992, p. 91). Moreover, the epistemological aspirations of transpersonal psychology can be seen through the work of Wilber (2000) whose writing on integral psychology has inspired efforts to bridge epistemological gaps between Eastern and Western psychological traditions.

The work of Epstein (2013) and Brach (2004) have also paved the way for the holistic integration of Buddhist principles into the domain of modern psychotherapy, and have done so in ways that largely maintain the integrity of Buddhist teachings. Several Jungian scholars and practitioners have also sought to holistically engage with the contemplative practices of the world’s religious traditions, with varying degrees of efficacy. One of the most successful of these studies is the work of Edward Edinger (1972), who examined the religious function of the psyche through the explanatory framework of Analytical Psychology. Thanks to Edinger’s work, it is in part through the explanatory framework of Analytical Psychology that self-surrender can be understood as an archetypal process; one that has been lived and treasured by several spiritual traditions in diverse social and historical contexts. One of the
central aspirations of the present study is to facilitate a generative and mutually enriching
dialogue between psychology and some of the world’s psycho-spiritual traditions; one that
can faithfully represent the psychological depths of religion/spiritually, and in so doing,
expanding contemporary understandings of what psychology potentially can be.

Aims of Present Study

There is currently a great need in the field of psychology for human-science based research into the psychology of religion and spirituality. The aim of the present study is to examine a phenomenon that has the distinction of being both understudied and often misunderstood: self-surrender. Self-surrender, within the context of religion/spirituality, is a phenomenon that evades precise definition by virtue of the fact that its most illuminating explanations are located in the symbolism and metaphysical doctrines of the world’s religious/spiritual traditions. For example, if one were to assume the anthropomorphic symbolism of the Abrahamic religions, one would explain self-surrender as a process of loving-surrender unto God.

Alternatively, self-surrender, when viewed from a Buddhist perspective, dispenses with anthropomorphic symbolism and can tentatively be explained in terms of surrendering the sense of a separate/dualistic self. A working psychological definition that bridges these conceptual universes is that self-surrender is, in part, a process that involves the surrendering of a limited/egocentric sense of self and the simultaneous realization of a deeper (transpersonal) ontology. Moreover, self-surrender entails an ethical transformation in terms of an individual’s way of being-in-relation to others. This ethical transformation is brought about through a profound shift in the ways that an individual understands and experiences their sense of self, and by association, their relationship to the world.
The importance of self-surrender can be appreciated when one reflects on the fact that this phenomenon reflects a mode of being-in-in-the-world that stands in stark contrast to the relentless pursuit of individual, self-centered satisfaction through acquisitiveness and the relentless consumption of commodities which characterizes the modern sensibility. Fromm (1976) speaks directly to this mode of being by positing the existence of two diametrically opposed ways of being-in-the-world in terms of “having” and “being”. On the one hand, the “having” mode is rooted in consumption and the desire to possess, control, and dominate. Fromm (1976) poignantly describes the existential significance of this mode of being in the following equation: “I am=what I have and what I consume” (Fromm, 1976, p. 27). On the other hand, “being” refers to an existential possibility that is characterized by relatedness, non-possessiveness, and ultimately, love.

Additionally, as Cushman (1995) points out, the modern configuration of selfhood can best be described as an “empty self” whose identifying trait is a “...pervasive sense of sense of personal emptiness and [which] is committed to the values of self-liberation through consumption” (Cushman, 1995, p.6). Cushman’s hauntingly accurate portrayal of the “empty self” testifies to the immense longing for liberation from the shackles of egocentric consciousness felt by modern humanity. In contrast to ways of being-in-the-world that are primarily egocentric and driven by insatiable desire, the concept of self-surrender may point to alternative existential possibilities such as the “being” mode described by Fromm (1976); possibilities that are instead guided by principles (and direct experiences) of selflessness and compassion towards others.

Additionally, the value of studying self-surrender is that this phenomenon may offer a framework for psychologists to develop a psycho-spiritual ontology which may, to some
extent, be shared across different religious/spiritual traditions. Perhaps one of the most obvious justifications for this research is that the vast majority of the world’s population are religiously affiliated. According to the most recent study by the Pew Research Center in 2012, approximately 84% of the world’s population identify with a religious group (Pew, 2012). Of course, religious affiliation need not entail any particular corresponding ontology or set of practices, however, it is likely that for a great many people, religious affiliation does mean something in terms of the ways that ontology is conceptualized and lived (i.e., in terms of what it means to be human, and in terms of what it means to live a ‘good’ life). Additionally, the significance of this statistic for the culturally-competent practice of psychology is relevant to mention here.

Given that human science psychology recognizes that all psychological perspectives are founded on implicit assumptions regarding what it means to be human, it is important for psychologists to reflect on their own assumptions concerning ontology, selfhood, and embodiment. This is because these assumptions follow from (and reinforce) their own theoretical perspectives and beliefs, thus they must be held in awareness in order to avoid unwittingly imposing them on clients. For the same reason, it is important for psychologists to have a basic understanding of their clients’ psycho-spiritual frameworks and the corresponding structures of selfhood and meaning that these structures contain. The awareness of potential differences between a therapist and a client’s conceptions of selfhood and ontology allows for greater honesty and transparency regarding the aims of therapy, and can minimize the risk of clients being unintentionally indoctrinated by their therapists under the banner of psychological treatment.

It is also relevant to mention here that, despite the fact that most of the world’s
population is embedded in traditional religious perspectives, religiosity among millennials and younger generations in the United States is considerably less than that of older generations. According to one of the most recent studies on religiosity among millennials by the Pew Research Center in 2010, millennials in the United States have shown a steep decrease both in religiosity as well as in religious affiliation since the early 70s (Pew, 2010). This is significant because, despite a number of important exceptions, the field of psychology largely remains an American-centered enterprise in terms of the production and dissemination of knowledge. For this reason, psychological research that integrates religion/spirituality with modern psychology is essential for the culturally-competent practice of psychology. The present study aims to make a modest contribution to this project.

Another aim of this study is to contribute to the development of qualitative methods that can be used to explore the psychology of religion from a human science perspective. The particular contribution of this study in this regard is that its methodology and corresponding methods follow from the particularity of the phenomenon being studied. In other words, given that self-surrender is here conceptualized as a psycho-spiritual phenomenon, the methods that have been developed to study this phenomenon are drawn from applied hermeneutic approaches as well as from autoethnography and contemplative practices. It is hoped that this study will encourage future research into qualitative methods that draw on contemplative practices and hermeneutic engagement with sacred texts to inform their study of religious/spiritual phenomena.

**Research Question**

The research question guiding this study is twofold: (1) How do different religious/spiritual traditions conceptualize and practice self-surrender, and (2) are there
patterns or structural similarities shared across different traditions in terms of their conceptualization of self-surrender? Given that various spiritual and academic authorities including Schuon (1984), Coomaraswamy (1987), and Huxley (2009), have claimed the universality of self-surrender, one of the primary aims of this study is to explore this possibility, and to do so in such a way that allows readers to draw their own conclusions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Quantitative approaches to studying self-surrender

The dominant framework through which the phenomenon of self-surrender has been studied within the context of mainstream psychology is through the use of quantitative methods that focus on examining the relationship between surrender and psychological health. One such study was conducted by Clements & Ermakova (2012), who sought to study the relationship between surrender and psychological stress. The authors of this drew on the Surrender Scale developed by Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch (2000) to measure surrender using two samples, with the first sample consisting of 460 university students and the second a high-risk sample of 230 pregnant women. One of the results of this study found Surrender “...to be significantly negatively related to State Anxiety and Trait Anxiety”, which led the authors to conclude that this research demonstrated support for the conceptualization of surrender as a psychological mechanism by which stress can be reduced. Moreover, the authors call for additional exploration into the potential for reducing stress levels in individuals through ‘increasing surrender’.

A similar study was conducted previously by McDonald & Gorsuch (2004), who sought to examine the relationship between conceptions of God, religious coping, motivation, and locus of control among mainline conservative Christians. With regard to locus of control,
the authors hypothesize that while, on the one hand, an external locus of control anchored in ‘luck’ or in ‘powerful others’ would correlate negatively with well-being, an external locus of control anchored in either self or God would correlate positively with well-being. The results from this study found that effective religious coping was characterized by an external locus of control that was anchored in God, and that, by contrast, coping styles characterized by self-reliance correlated with a decreased sense of wellbeing.

The above referenced studies share several methodological and epistemological features in common, and reflect a common psychological orientation towards conceptualizing and studying surrender within the context of mainstream psychology. Chief among these is a way of conceptualizing and operationalizing self-surrender that allows for it to be both quantified and measured. From this point of view, it is possible to regard self-surrender as an independent variable that can potentially be manipulated in order to arrive at decreased levels of stress. Additionally, the common sphere of concern for mainstream psychological studies on surrender is not with understanding the phenomena of surrender as such, but rather on understanding the relationship between surrender and psychological health (which is usually conceptualized in terms of anxiety, stress, or ‘spiritual well-being’).

One of the consequences of this limited sphere of interest is that these studies tend to conceptualize self-surrender reductionistically (i.e., as a phenomenon that readily lends itself to quantification). Another element of reductionism can be seen with the fact that these studies tend to draw on the ontologies of a single religious/spiritual tradition, which often leads to taken-for-granted assumptions concerning the meaning and ontological significance of self-surrender. As Wong-McDonald & Gorsuch (2000) point out regarding the results of their study: “...[these] results may not be generalizable beyond mainline conservative
Christians” (p. 332). In short, although mainstream psychological studies have contributed to the field of psychology’s understanding of the relationship between self-surrender and psychological health, there is a marked absence of literature that explicitly deals with the psycho-spiritual significance of self-surrender (i.e., as a lived-ontology).

The present study seeks to address these gaps in the literature by providing a psycho-spiritually nuanced examination of self-surrender; one which takes into account the ontological and epistemological significance of self-surrender within the context of a lived spirituality. Additionally, this study provides a methodological contribution to the psychological literature on self-surrender through crafting integrative qualitative methods that can generate meaningful knowledge on self-surrender. In short, this study aims to contribute an innovative methodology for studying self-surrender; one which follows from unique characteristics of the phenomenon itself rather than from the epistemological premises of scientific positivism.

Additionally, it is important to mention in depth the pioneering work of McGilchrist (2010), whose neuroscientific research into the differences between the left and right hemispheres of the brain has had profound implications for the interdisciplinary understanding of self-surrender. The work of McGilchrist (2010) is unique in that it represents a psychospiritually-nuanced, non-reductionist, and non-materialist approach to examining the left and right hemispheres of the brain. McGilchrist (2010) argues that there are profound differences between the left and right brain hemisphere with regard to the functions that they serve as well as to the modes of perception and embodiment that they facilitate. It is no mistake of evolution, McGilchrist (2010) argues, that the human brain remains deeply divided in terms of distinct left and right hemispheres which are
connected via the corpus callosum. In other words, the fact that human brain hemispheres have not fused together throughout the evolutionary process suggests not only that they each serve very different functions, but also that their separation into left and right hemispheres itself serves a potentially important function.

Moreover, one of the most important assertions that McGilchrist (2010) makes around the differences between the left and right hemispheres of the brain is that they are not symmetrical; each hemisphere functions semi-independently and becomes dominant with regard to certain functions that they serve. However, though McGilchrist (2010) strongly emphasizes the interdependence of the two brain hemispheres, as well as the essential role that both have historically played in the development of Western culture, he maintains that “…the left hemisphere is ultimately dependent on, one might almost say parasitic on, the right, though it seems to have no awareness of this fact” (McGilchrist 2010, p. 6). The left hemisphere’s intrinsic dependence on the right hemisphere follows from the essentially different functions that the left/right brain hemispheres serve.

Another way of expressing this idea is in terms of ‘hemispheric dominance’, which refers to the tendency of one brain hemisphere to regulate and monitor the other, a function that McGilchrist (2010) argues is the natural role of the right hemisphere. However, in modern times, the left hemisphere and its correspondent way of perceiving reality has come to dominate over the right hemisphere, and this inversion of the relationship between hemispheres is identified by McGilchrist (2010) as being, in part, responsible for much of the social and psychological disequilibrium that characterizes the modern world.
After over a decade of research into the differences between brain hemispheres, McGilchrist (2010) concludes that the differences between the left and right hemispheres of the brain can best be approached and understood in terms of the different type of attention and perception that they facilitate. On the one hand, the left hemisphere of the brain appears to be responsible for narrow, focused attention. As he points out, “The left hemisphere is the hemisphere of abstraction, which as the world itself tells us, is the process of wresting things from their context. This, and its related capacity to categorize things once they have been abstracted, are the foundations of its intellectual power” (p. 50). In other words, the left hemisphere is responsible for facilitating the narrow and focused type of attention that is involved with the mode of abstract thinking that allows human beings to effectively manipulate and control aspects of the phenomenal world. The left hemisphere of the brain is concerned with particulars; with details and narrowly focused attention. The value of such a mode of perceptions is clear when one looks at the scientific and industrial achievements of the modern world (i.e. the scientific method itself can be said to rely on processes of careful observation and narrow attention).

On the other hand, the right hemisphere is not concerned with particulars, but rather with the gestalt - with the whole. As McGilchrist (2010) explains, “…the link between the right hemisphere and holistic or gestalt perception is one of the most reliable and durable of the generalizations about hemisphere differences, and that it follows from the differences in the nature of attention” (p. 46). Stated differently, the right hemisphere is concerned not with multiplicity but with unity. The right hemisphere of the brain is concerned with identifying patterns and with integrating desperate elements of our experience into constellations of interrelated meanings.
One particularly insightful statement that McGilchrist makes regarding the right hemisphere is that “The right hemisphere sees the whole, before whatever it is gets broken up into parts in our attempt to know it” (p. 46). This suggests that there is something primordial about the mode of perception that is facilitated by the right hemisphere; a perspective that has striking parallels with the nondual mode of experience that characterizes self-surrender. Additionally, this notion also speaks to the tendency of the left-hemisphere to facilitate a mode of ‘knowing’ whereby experience is broken apart in to fragments, and is both abstracted and analyzed without due regard to the ‘whole’ of which the phenomena under examination is but a part. In other words, the left-hemisphere is responsible for dualistic perception.

The existential and experiential implications of left/right hemispheric dominance follow directly from the different functions that these hemispheres play. An individual whose left-hemisphere is dominant vis a vis the right hemisphere may experience the world very cerebrally; that is, without genuine contact with the phenomenal world but rather primarily through the processes of abstraction. Moreover, given that the left-hemisphere facilitates a mode of being that is competitive, unempathic, and experientially disconnected/alienated from others, such an individual’s experience is likely to encompass some of these characteristics. We see these ideas expressed clearly in the following two passages from The Master and His Emissary:

“I believe the essential difference between the right hemisphere and the left hemisphere is that the right hemisphere pays attention to the Other, whatever it is that exists apart from ourselves, with which it sees itself in profound relation. It is deeply attracted to, and given life by, the relationship, the betweenness, that exists with this Other. By contrast, the left hemisphere pays attention to the virtual world that it has created, which is self-consistent, but self-contained, ultimately disconnected from the Other, making it powerful, but ultimately only able to operate on, and know, itself” (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 93).
“...I suggested that there were two ways of being in the world, both of which were essential. One was to allow things to be present to us in all their embodied particularity, with all their changeability and impermanence, and their interconnectedness, as part of a whole which is forever in flux... The other was to step outside the flow of experience and ‘experience’ our experience in a special way: to re-present the world in a form that is less truthful, but apparently clearer, and therefore cast in form which is more useful for manipulation of the world and one another... From this world where we feel detached, but in relation to which we are powerful” (McGilchrist, 2010, p. 93).

There are a number of key insights to be gleaned from McGilchrist’s analysis, particularly in terms of the relational and psychospiritual significance of hemispheric dominance. From the above passages, we see that it is the right hemisphere that facilitates a mode of being-in-the-world which allows for the experiences of interconnectedness and empathy. Moreover, the right hemisphere also enables genuine contact with the supposedly ‘external’ world through softening the boundaries between what we assume to constitute ourselves and what we understand to be outside of us. Relationally, it can be said that the right hemisphere facilitates genuine contact with others; contact that is characterized by openness and empathic connection rather than by instrumental thinking.

Additionally, it is also the right hemisphere that facilitates a non-dual mode of experiencing in which the boundaries between self and other are apperceived to be illusory. Psychospiritually, the right hemisphere enables us to perceive the emptiness of our supposedly separate selves, and thus to recognize the profound interconnection shared between all beings. In other words, it could meaningfully be argued that the right hemisphere facilitates a mode of self-perception that allows for the loosening or transcending of rigid ego-boundaries, and perhaps even for some, an experience of non-duality. By contrast, the left hemisphere appears to facilitate a mode of self-perception that is inherently dualistic and often rigidly egocentric. With this hemisphere’s
preoccupation with power and multiplicity, it is deaf, dumb, and blind to the call of the ‘other’ in all senses of the word.

**Psychodynamic literature on self-surrender**

Turning towards the psychodynamic literature on self-surrender, we find an emerging area of inquiry that is broadly focused on the significance of self-surrender within the context of psychotherapy. Perhaps the most widely cited work on this subject was produced by Ghent (1990), who sought to distinguish the phenomenon of surrender from masochism and to articulate a psychoanalytic understanding of the psychological importance of surrender as both an interpersonal and an intrapsychic process. Ghent distinguishes surrender from masochism and submission by pointing out that whereas masochism and submission often lead to a corrosion of one’s identity, and the experience of feeling at the mercy of another person, surrender entails a sense of wholeness and integration that may or may not involve the presence of another. This point is echoed by Orloff (2014) who also initially defines surrender in terms of what it is not: “It is not failure, defeat, holding up the white flag, or weakness, as it is traditionally defined” (Orloff, 2014, p.1). Additionally, Ghent (1990) articulates six core aspects of surrender that may be used to formulate a tentative definition:

1. *It does not necessarily require another person's presence, except possibly as a guide. One may surrender "in the presence of another," not "to another" as in the case of submission.*

2. *Surrender is not a voluntary activity. One cannot choose to surrender, though one can choose to submit. One can provide facilitative conditions for surrender but cannot make it happen.*
3. It may be accompanied by a feeling of dread and death, and/or clarity, relief, even ecstasy.

4. It is an experience of being "in the moment", totally in the present, where past and future, the two tenses that require "mind" in the sense of secondary processes, have receded from consciousness.

5. Its ultimate direction is the discovery of one's identity, one's sense of self, one's sense of wholeness, even one's sense of unity with other living beings. This is quite unlike submission in which the reverse happens: one feels one's self as a puppet in the power of another; one's sense of identity atrophies.

6. In surrender there is an absence of domination and control; the reverse is true in the case of submission (Ghent, 1990, p. 109).

Ghent’s work represents an important contribution to psychoanalytic understandings around the phenomenon of surrender, because, as he skillfully points out, surrender is a process that has been grossly misunderstood in psychoanalytic literature through its conflation with masochism and unhealthy submission. However, one area in which this study falls short is in the connection that Ghent seeks to make between Eastern and Western understandings of surrender. On the one hand, Ghent rightly argues that, while in the West, surrender tends to be understood in terms of defeat, in the East, surrender is more often understood in terms of liberation. However, Ghent’s representation of surrender within the context of Eastern spirituality leaves much to be desired.

One clear instance of this can be seen when Ghent writes that “The indirect object of the surrender could as well be a tree, the sun, God … anything or anyone that will not impinge with its own "ego." The process is what is important; the object to whom one
surrenders is irrelevant” (Ghent, 1990, p. 110). The error committed here is that Ghent overlooks the potential ontological significance of the ‘object’ to whom one is surrendering. This is particularly so within the context of self-surrender to God, however conceptualized and understood across different traditions. In order to address these gaps in the literature, this study seeks to further explore the ontological significance of both the ‘self’ that is being surrendered as well as the entity or process to which this surrender is either implicitly or explicitly directed. This analysis will involve an exploration of the different ways that self-surrender has been conceptualized, symbolized, and lived-out.

Additionally, the Winnicottian perspective that Ghent (1990) assumes to analyze the guru-disciple relationship bears the imprint of both a creative analysis as well as of a reductionist understanding of the psycho-spiritual function of the spiritual master (guru) within the context of the self-surrender process. We see this when Ghent (1990) begins his analysis by providing the following aphorism: “It has been said that there are no gurus, only disciples” (p. 110). Neither source nor explanation is provided for this aphorism, which by virtue of being an aphorism (i.e., a terse statement that is saturated with multiple layers of esoteric meaning) is enough to warrant elaboration, particularly since this study is directed to an audience that is not epistemologically rooted in the Eastern wisdom tradition that produced this understanding. Instead, Ghent (1990) provides this decontextualized paradoxical statement to support the psychoanalytic reductionism to which he subjects the guru/disciple relationship: “The guru [sic] an illusion—an illusion which permits the disciple to yield, surrender false self, and therein have a chance at finding himself. The process may be thought of as allowing the disciple to re-enter the exhilarating world of transitional experiencing—wherein the guru is the transitional object” (p. 110). This analysis can be
regarded as reductionist not only through its interpretation of the guru/disciple relationship in terms of a Winnicottian object/relations framework, but also because it unwittingly conceptualizes the guru/disciple relationship as a regressive phenomenon (albeit a ‘transitional’ one).

To be clear, there is truth to the notion that the spiritual master/guru can be understood as a necessary illusion (how could this be otherwise, if the spiritual tradition itself has produced such an understanding?). However, the epistemological basis from which this statement can most meaningfully be made is that of the tradition itself, and this is where more elaboration and exploration is required. Moreover, by insisting that the spiritual master as an illusion, Ghent (1990) overlooks the fact that the guru embodies and lives out the process of surrender. In other words, the guru is not just an illusion, but rather a guide (or perhaps even a role model), whose purpose it is to facilitate the disciple’s own journey towards self-surrender.

Additionally, Safran (2016) builds on the research of Ghent (1990) by examining the tension between personal agency and self-surrender within the context of the analytic process. He argues that the valorization and overemphasis of personal agency (i.e., that one is in complete control of one’s destiny) is consistent with the ideals of modern individualism and secular humanism. Additionally, Safran (2016) explains that the tendency to hold an exaggerated sense of agency often results in experiences of narcissistic injury, cynicism, personal despair, and meaninglessness when an individual suffers from the experience of “...having one’s sense of omnipotence thwarted by the exigencies of life” (Safran, 2016, p. 59). However, despite the negative consequences that follow from an exaggerated sense of agency, Safran (2016) points out that some degree of instrumental thinking (i.e., agentic
action) is required in order for individuals to function effectively in the world.

The main contribution of Safran’s work can be seen with his adapting the insights gleaned through his hermeneutic analysis of spiritual ontologies to the psychoanalytic process. But before examining his study’s conclusions, it will be useful to highlight some of its conceptual contributions, which were arrived at through hermeneutic engagement with Buddhist and Christian perspectives. Safran (2016) introduces the Japanese conceptions of ‘self-power’ and ‘other-power’ approaches to explore two seemingly very different ontologies. Self-power approaches are characterized by an emphasis on individual effort, discipline, and personal effort. Examples of this may include schools of Buddhist thought that center around the practice of meditation and systematic self-inquiry in order to attain enlightenment. In contrast, other-power approaches encourage the twin aspects of surrender and faith, and are exemplified through the practices of guru-devotion as well as through spiritual traditions grounded in ontologies that locate agentic power outside of the individual self.

Two conceptual examples of this that Safran (2016) explores are the Christian conception of grace and the Shin-Buddhist notion of compassion. The common thread that unites these two perspectives under the banner of ‘other-power’ is that both grace and compassion are understood to flow from a transpersonal ontological source that dispenses loving-mercy to individuals regardless of their deeds or merits. Additionally, while both self-power and other-power approaches result in the negation of the illusory ego (in as far as the individual’s sense of agency is concerned), each accomplishes this goal in markedly different ways. While self-power approaches harness the ego-structure to accomplish its purpose of ego-transcendence, other-power approaches purposively negate the ego’s hubris by locating
all agentic power outside of the self.

Returning to the implications of this hermeneutic research on the psychoanalytic process, Safran (2016) concludes that, although assisting patients develop a degree of personal agency is a necessary part of the therapeutic process, it is equally important to facilitate patients’ realization around the limitations of individual agency. Additionally, Safran (2016) transposes the phenomenon of grace from its original theological sense to a psychoanalytically-friendly conception that allows for a discussion around the role of surrender in the psychoanalytic relationship. Safran (2016) argues that a patient’s realization of their therapist’s benevolent intentions can lead to an experience of grace, which is explained as “...an experience that there is another out there who freely and gratuitously provides them with the gift of their caring”, and which facilitates an interpersonal process whereby “…the patient is able to taste the experience of gratitude, and a sense that there is goodness in the world” (p. 70).

Two elements shared by most psychodynamically-oriented studies of self-surrender are their use of religious/spiritual ontologies to inform their analysis, and their efforts towards transposing these ontologies into the context of the psychoanalytic relationship. This has been explored in detail earlier through the work of Ghent (1990) and Safran (2016), but can also be extended to the few additional studies on this subject such as that of Hidas (1981), who additionally points out that: “With the spiritual quest and long-term psychotherapy at the deepest levels sharing similar goals, an examination of the surrender process can be approached usefully from both a psychological and spiritual base” (Hidas, 1991, p. 28). The importance of these studies is that they provide a conceptual framework for psychotherapists to understand the phenomenon of surrender which allows it to be distinguished from
masochism and other forms of psychopathology. Moreover, these studies have called attention to the importance of surrender as an interpersonal process in the therapeutic relationship.

However, one area of inquiry that remains largely understudied and neglected by the existing literature on surrender is the psycho-spiritual significance of this phenomenon within the original context of religion/spirituality. What is absent from the literature is a psychologically nuanced exploration of surrender as a distinctly spiritual/religious phenomenon. The present study seeks to fill these gaps in the literature through exploring the phenomenon of self-surrender within the context of two religious/spiritual traditions. Additionally, the methodological principles that inform this study will follow directly from the nature of self-surrender as a religious/spiritual phenomenon (i.e., as opposed to being conceptualized as a relational experience or interpersonal process). On the one hand, it is important to recognize that existing studies on surrender have pushed the boundaries of modern psychology through drawing on various religious/spiritual conceptions of self-surrender to inform and deepen psychoanalytic theory and treatment. And on the other, it is equally important to recognize that this work must be carried further.

Chapter 3: Method

Methodology

The methodological approach of this dissertation is an interpretive synthesis of two qualitative methodologies: applied hermeneutics and autoethnography. The reasoning behind selecting these methods, which are located both within and outside the normative boundaries of mainstream psychology, is that the phenomenon of self-surrender both encompasses and transcends the traditionally ‘psychological’. That is, self-surrender as an archetypal human
experience opens out onto multiple domains including psychology, metaphysics, spirituality, and religion. To neglect one of these dimensions would necessarily produce a representation of self-surrender that is lacking in dimensionality and depth. On the other hand, to synthesize both a microcosmic perspective (i.e., the personal/psychological) with a macrocosmic one (i.e., transpersonal/metaphysically-situated) is to approach the phenomenon of self-surrender in its complexity and subtlety.

To focus on self-surrender as a purely psychological phenomenon risks falling into the error of psychologism, which “…attempts to explain the greater in terms of the lesser and excludes all that goes beyond its own limits” (Oldmeadow, 2013, p. 41). Similarly, to examine self-surrender through a purely philosophical/metaphysical framework is to overlook the significance of self-surrender as a lived and embodied human experience. However, when these modes of understanding are synthesized we are able to approach the phenomenon of self-surrender as an integral whole. Thus, the decision to employ a mixed-methodology that creatively synthesizes two qualitative methods (applied hermeneutics & autoethnography), together with elements of contemplative practice, follows from the distinctive qualities of the phenomenon itself: self-surrender understood as a phenomenon that straddles the tension between duality and nonduality; between the personal and the transpersonal, between the particular and the universal, and between form and essence.

Although the boundaries separating the psychological from the spiritual are inherently problematic in the sense that they reproduce the Cartesian dualism and materialism that characterizes modern mainstream psychology, ignoring the prevalence of these modern binaries within mainstream psychology risks opening the door to all kinds of confusion, obfuscation, and misunderstandings of the nature of self-surrender. This being said, it is
important to acknowledge that within the field of psychology itself there have been significant efforts to challenge the notion that the psychological is merely individual (i.e., limited to personal subjectivity). The emerging field of transpersonal psychology provides ample proof of this. Lajoie & Shapiro (1992) define transpersonal psychology in the following terms: “Transpersonal psychology is concerned with the study of humanity’s highest potential, and with the recognition, understanding, and realization of unitive, spiritual, and transcendent states of consciousness” (Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992, p. 91). The emergence of transpersonal psychology as a sub-field within the broader discipline of psychology offers the reassuring possibility that the field of psychology can be more inclusive of religious/spiritual ontologies and epistemologies.

One of the first decisions that had to be made when deciding to study self-surrender was what sources to draw from. I chose two psycho-spiritual traditions, Sufism and Buddhism, and the rationale behind this decision bears mentioning here. However, before going into the rationale behind choosing these two psycho-spiritual traditions, a word must be said about the preliminary decision to draw from tradition itself. For the purposes of this study, tradition stands in contrast to what is not traditional, that is, what is modern, postmodern and any permutations thereof. Self-surrender is a traditional religious phenomenon, and the rationale for drawing from religious traditions as a way of approaching self-surrender is embedded within the nature of self-surrender as it will be defined in this study.

A guiding methodological principle of this dissertation is that our understanding of the phenomenon of self-surrender can be greatly enriched by participation in one of its traditional forms. As Gadamer (1960/2006) points out, “understanding is to be thought of less
as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated” (Gadamer, 2006, p. 290). This participation constitutes an act of transmission, whereby the understanding that these traditions are tasked with preserving is communicated across time and space.

The logos of this approach draws from both Gadamer’s notion of ‘true prejudices’, and his analysis of the historicity of human understanding, particularly as it emerged through the modern Enlightenment. The former provides a methodological framework through which to study self-surrender, and the latter is relevant to our purposes in situating this study within the context of contemporary psychology as well as within modernity. In identifying the prejudices of the modern Enlightenment, Gadamer uncovers the epistemological foundation that underpins the scientific method, and thus also the epistemological framework that guides both modern psychology and the lay population that draws its own epistemological understandings from it.

Gadamer (1960/2006) points out that the Enlightenment prejudice consists of a “prejudice against prejudice” (p. 272). In its original application, he argues that this prejudice “…is primarily directed against the religious tradition of Christianity…against the Bible and the dogmatic interpretation of it” (p. 272). However, in modern times this prejudice has been generalized to all traditional knowledge systems (i.e., world religions), and has resulted in the crystallization amongst both educated and lay populations of an attitude that views tradition as possessing no inherent epistemological authority. Gadamer (1960/2006) continues, “It [the Enlightenment] wants to understand tradition correctly – i.e., rationally and without prejudice”, and that “In general, the Enlightenment tends to accept no authority and to decide everything before the judgement seat of reason” (p. 272). For the purposes of this present
study, it is sufficient to note that the contemporary associations that many of us have to the notion prejudice (i.e., that it implies bias, conjecture, non-objectivity), and most importantly that it cannot lead to truth stem from this Enlightenment prejudice.

By contrast, Gadamer’s project seeks to rehabilitate the authority of tradition as well as the authority of traditional authority itself. However, this project should not be confused with an attempt to return to the romanticism of the pre-Enlightenment era, when religious dogma and doctrine were largely accepted without being engaged with or examined by way of critical thought and personal verification. The central question that Gadamer (1960/2006) asks is: “Does being situated within traditions really mean being subject to prejudices and limited in one’s freedom?” (p. 276). He answers this question eloquently in the form of a rhetorical question: “Is not, rather, all human existence, even the freest, limited and qualified in various ways?” (p. 276). In other words, Gadamer (1960/2006) is arguing that all personal understanding is limited by virtue of being situated within one’s socio-historical and cultural contexts. The key, as Gadamer (1960/2006) emphasizes, is not to remove our prejudices/prejudgements, but rather to recognize our prejudices and to reflexively place them in front of us for critical examination and personal verification in light of our immediate concerns.

Both the theoretical framework as well as the methodology that Gadamer (1960/2006) developed for accomplishing this task inform the present study. His notion of “true prejudices”, in particular, has influenced both the autoethnographic as well as applied hermeneutic portions of this study. The present study draws on the notion of ‘true prejudices’ through adopting the epistemological position articulated by Gadamer (1960/2006): “Since the human intellect is too weak to manage without prejudices, it is at least fortunate to have been educated with true prejudices” (p. 273). The notion of true prejudices, in its original
context, refers to the German Enlightenment’s recognition of the “...true prejudices of the Christian religion”, and thus to a way of understanding prejudice that does not place it in a necessarily antagonistic position to the pursuit of truth and understanding (p. 273).

This brings us to the rationale for choosing Sufism and Buddhism as the doctrinal frameworks or true prejudices through which to represent and examine the phenomenon of self-surrender. I chose the Sufi tradition for a number of reasons. The first is that Sufism constitutes the inner core of the Muslim religion, and serves as the repository for its inner metaphysical teachings and correspondent contemplative practices. The second reason is that this tradition is the most intimately familiar to me in an experiential sense. Sufism, or *tasawwuf* as it is traditionally named, is the tradition that I partake in and experience the world through. By drawing on the Sufi tradition, I will be able to examine the phenomenon of self-surrender as expressed through a particular tradition from within that tradition. The epistemological significance of this approach is twofold: (1) self-surrender as an archetypal experience will be examined through its expression in a particular form, and (2) that this understanding will be sought from within the tradition itself.

Another reason for choosing Sufism is that it employs a monotheistic framework through which to understand self-surrender. Monotheism provides an accessible framework through which to understand self-surrender because it contains an exoteric/esoteric structure that addresses different levels of understanding; from an ordinary believer’s understanding of self-surrender as conformity to religious Law and affirmation of creedal dogma to the nondual realization of a saint or sage whose intellect pierces through the veil of anthropomorphic symbolism and contingent forms. Moreover, I chose to draw on Islam as a religious tradition in order to challenge misguided conceptions of this religion that are
destructively being played out around the world – both outside this tradition as well as within some (alleged) versions of it.

The decision to draw on Buddhist teaching also stems from a number of methodological considerations. The first of these is that Buddhism, unlike Sufism, does not employ a monotheistic framework through which to understand self-surrender. In other words, from the Buddhist perspective, the explicit focus is perhaps not on whom one is surrendering to and more on what is being surrendered, and why. This comparative-hermeneutic approach will also assist in dispelling the possible misconceptions that self-surrender is the exclusive property of a single religious/spiritual tradition, or even that of a broader religious framework such as monotheism. Moreover, this approach will assist with identifying the unique contributions of each tradition in addition to their complementarity. It will also provide a source of otherness or alterity in the data, which will allow for a deeper analysis of self-surrender by virtue of being drawn from a tradition that is other than my own.

In short, the methodological significance of the present study is that it will allow for an exploration of possible areas of convergence (as well as divergence) between these traditions in terms of the possible ways that self-surrender expresses itself in each tradition’s doctrinal framework (i.e., their ontologies and symbolism) and corresponding contemplative praxis. Moreover, it is expected that this methodological approach will facilitate a psycho-spiritually nuanced study on the relationship between the psychology of self-surrender, contemplative practice, and religion.

**Key Methodological Principles**

*The Hermeneutic Circle*

“What is decisive is not to get out of the [hermeneutic] circle but to come into it in the right way. The circle of understanding is not an orbit in which any random kind of knowledge may
move; it is the expression of the existential fore-structure of Dasien itself. It is not to be reduced to the level of a vicious circle, or even of a circle which is merely tolerated. In the circle is hidden a positive possibility of the most primordial kind of knowing. To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves” (Heidegger, 1927/1962, p. 195).

The idea that understanding operates in a circular trajectory has a number of methodological implications for this paper. Firstly, this passage contains a cautionary warning to the person charged with the hermeneutic task. The essence of this warning is for the hermeneutic reader to be aware of their own ‘fore-structures of understanding’; that is, their subjective prejudices, prior assumptions, and pre-existing understandings around the subject of the text which they seek to approach hermeneutically. The risk of failing to become aware of these pre-understandings prior to approaching the text is that the reader might not succeed in making genuine contact with the text itself and instead may simply find what one already knows or expects; thus presenting as research what are, in fact, only one’s pre-understandings.

As a result, the possibility for insight or new understanding is all but eliminated. In other words, Heidegger (1927/1962) is writing about a failure of understanding that is brought about by the reader simply finding in the text an externalized confirmation of their own pre-existing assumptions. This is what is meant by a “vicious circle”, and while a vicious circle is to be avoided because of its tendency to keep us locked within the confines of our pre-understandings, the hermeneutic circle is intended to accomplish a very different end. Gadamer (1960/2006) builds on these ideas when he writes that “All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by
imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze ‘on the things themselves’… Working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there” (pp. 266-267). Thus, we see that it is the quality of imperceptibility of fore-projections that allows them to potentially compromise the hermeneutic task before it is even begun.

Another way of expressing these ideas is that fore-structures of understanding remain largely unconscious. If this is so, then the process of working through these fore-structures of understanding can be seen as a reflexive, insight-oriented methodology that seeks to bring unconscious thoughts and feelings around a subject into conscious awareness. However, it is important to note that this is not done in order to eliminate the hermeneutic reader’s biases, nor is it done to change them. As Gadamer (1960/2006) points out:

“…a person trying to understand a text is prepared for it to tell him something. That is why a hermeneutically trained consciousness must be, from the start, sensitive to the text’s alterity. But this kind of sensitivity involves neither ‘neutrality’ with respect to content nor the extinction of one’s self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one’s fore-meanings. (Gadamer, (1960/2006), p. 269)

From this passage it becomes clear that the objective of foregrounding one’s prejudices is to bring them into awareness so that they do not unwittingly distort the reader’s capacity for receptivity to the ‘otherness’ of the text; that is, to the text’s alterity, which stems from its having been produced outside of oneself (by the author of the text, who is himself/herself participating in a tradition whose meanings influence and transcend the conscious intentionality of the author). Moreover, Gadamer (1960/2006) describes the hermeneutic situation aptly when he writes that “Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness” (p. 295). This familiarity stems from the reader’s pre-
understandings, and can either facilitate the hermeneutic project through enriching the reader’s capacity to experientially engage with the text, or else hinder it through unconsciously coloring the reader’s perception of the text and thus preventing genuine contact and new understanding from being formed.

If the first part of the hermeneutic project involves foregrounding one’s own prejudices and biases, the second involves some form of contact with the text that is to be studied. The relevant methodological question here concerns the nature of this contact – what it should involve, and what should constitute its aims? Again, Gadamer (1960/2006) points to the right direction:

“When we try to understand a text, we do not try to transpose ourselves into the author’s mind but, if one wants to use this terminology, we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views. But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying could be right. If we want to understand, we will try to make his arguments even stronger. This happens even in conversation… The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but a sharing in a common meaning (Gadamer, (1960/2006), p. 292).

From this description we can infer that one of the methodological aims of the hermeneutic project is to facilitate the reader’s entering into the perspective of the text’s author. In other words, hermeneutically engaging with the text involves trying to understand the perspective from which the text was derived, and what the author is trying to convey. To this it might be added that a certain degree of perspectival generosity is involved. This is what it means to “…try to understand how what he is saying could be right”, and by implication, to entertain the possibility that one’s own pre-understandings concerning the text might have been wrong (p. 292). In short, the aim of the hermeneutic reading is to open oneself up to the perspective of the text in a way that is open and receptive to its message. The result of such a process is often a new understanding that may contest, supplement, or
deepen the perspective of the original author (as presented in the text). In the case of the present study, this may include (but will not be limited to) drawing out the psychological significance of the text’s presentation of self-surrender.

The new understanding that follows from foregrounding one’s prejudices and engaging with the text in a spirit of receptivity to its alterity can take different forms. New understanding has the potential to challenge, adjust, or change one’s initial fore-understandings of the phenomenon being studied. Additionally, new understanding derived from the hermeneutic process can refine, substantiate, and add depth to one’s pre-understandings should they prove to hold true in the face of the new understandings that emerge from the interpretive process. In other words, new understanding need not negate pre-understanding; however, the hermeneutic reader must always be open to this possibility. Moreover, it could be said that in the process of the negation of pre-understandings there exists an emergent confirmation of new understandings, and vice versa. That is, even in the confirmation of one’s pre-understandings there exists the possibility of a negation; if not of the beliefs themselves, then perhaps the way such beliefs are represented, explained, or experienced.

What makes this process a hermeneutic circle rather than a two-way movement from pre-understanding to new understanding is the hermeneutic reader’s subsequent return to re-examining their pre-understandings in light of the insight gained through the hermeneutic process. The result is a deepened understanding of the phenomenon in question and an attitude of openness towards further layers of meaning. In other words, the hermeneutic process need not end here. Rather, hermeneutic interpretation entails a commitment to the hermeneutic process itself, and can continue indefinitely with each successive cycle holding
the potential for arriving at new understanding.

**Procedures**

*Preliminary Note:*

As an autoethnographic researcher working with religious/spiritual texts, I do not imagine that my experience or understanding comes close to encompassing all the possible understandings and meanings of self-surrender. Moreover, I do not presume that my understandings are shared by all the members of any psycho-spiritual tradition. Additionally, it is worth stating the obvious, that the texts being used in this study are not representative samples of the all world’s great spiritual traditions. If patterns and relationships are found through this research, these relationships are in no way meant to suggest an essential form of self-surrender against which all traditional religious forms may be measured.

Given that self-surrender is believed to constitute a quintessential aspect of religious experience, particularly when lived out as a mode of love and service to others, it seems appropriate to examine this phenomenon through an interpretive hermeneutic engagement with texts from different spiritual traditions. Additionally, since the focus of this study is specifically on the psychology of self-surrender, the methods used should also examine the lived-experience of self-surrender. To this end, this study will draw on analytic autoethnography to complement the interpretive hermeneutic process.

The first method that will be crafted represents an interpretive synthesis of two qualitative methods: autoethnography and applied hermeneutics. Since there are multiple understandings around the theory and practice of autoethnography, it will be helpful to clarify some of the most salient principles that have gone into shaping the logos of its application for this study. Anderson (2006) outlines five essential elements of what he terms analytic
Autoethnography: “… (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis” (Anderson, 2006, p. 378). These five tenets provide a point of departure for developing the autoethnographic and applied hermeneutic methodologies for this study.

What does it mean for an autoethnographic researcher to assume complete member researcher status, and why is it methodologically important? At the most basic level, CMR status involves the autoethnographer’s affiliation with the group being studied. Of course, affiliation can be understood in a number of ways. One of these ways involves the researcher’s membership in the group being studied, and this is perhaps the most essential dimension of CMR status. The methodological significance of CMR status in this dissertation is that it allows for the psychological study of self-surrender through studying a tradition from within that tradition itself. This is important because it allows the researcher to draw on personal experience in order to anchor the abstract notion of self-surrender in lived human experience, and to illustrate the psychological and spiritual significance of self-surrender as an embodied human experience. Within the context of the present study, the condition of CMR status is satisfied through the author’s affiliation with Sufism as a student on the Sufi spiritual path.

It is important to note here that the author’s autoethnographic account of self-surrender is in no way an attempt to articulate a homogenous, totalizing, or exhaustive representation self-surrender as a human experience. In other words, the autoethnographic portion of this dissertation intends not to establish what self-surrender should look like, nor what it must look like, but rather one way that it can look like, through its expression in the
unique life-experience of a single person that has experienced self-surrender through a particular religious form in the contemporary world. As an old Sufi proverb explains, ‘there are as many paths to God as there are souls in this world’.

The second and third principles of analytic autoethnography involve “… (2) Analytic reflexivity and (3) narrative visibility of the researcher’s self…” (Anderson, 2006, p. 378). Analytic reflexivity can be understood as a dialectical process of introspection whereby the researcher continuously examines their own assumptions, beliefs, reactions, and conclusions. Anderson (2006) describes this concept in the following words: “It [analytic-reflexivity] entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one’s actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others” (p. 382). For the purposes of this dissertation, analytic reflexivity enriches the autoethnographic material, creating a space for both autoethnographic description and critical reflection on my underlying belief-structures and theoretical assumptions, and in articulating the historicity of these understandings. Additionally, it is worth mentioning that the notion of reflexivity used in this study follows from its conceptualization as, in part, a method characterized by introspection, as demonstrated by Finlay (2008).

The notion of analytic-reflexivity is strikingly similar in terms of its methodological functions to that of foregrounding one’s pre-understandings. Both tools are designed to provide a reflexive space for the author to hermeneutically examine their own beliefs and prejudices, and both tools facilitate the pursuit of deeper layers of understanding. However, analytic reflexivity is situated within an autoethnographic methodology, whereas the foregrounding of pre-understandings is situated in an applied-hermeneutic methodology. Thus, the ends to which these tools are applied can be said to differ somewhat; the former generally
seeks to arrive at deeper understandings of broader psychological and socio-cultural phenomenon through self-analysis, whereas the latter is usually directed towards the interpretive examination of a particular text which then opens out onto broader psychological, historical, and socio-cultural elements as well.

For the purposes of this study, analytic autoethnography and interpretative hermeneutic analysis will be synthesized into a single method. This method will seek to accomplish two complementary goals: The first is to provide an autoethnographic account of the author’s experience with self-surrender. This will be done in order to examine the psychological and psycho-spiritual significance of self-surrender within the context of lived human experience in the modern world. The second goal will be to set the preliminary groundwork for a hermeneutically-inspired analysis of two psycho-spiritual texts. That is, this method will facilitate the author’s entering into a hermeneutic circle through creating a space through which to examine the author’s pre-understandings around both the phenomenon of self-surrender. By foregrounding the author’s pre-understandings in the autoethnographic portion of this study, the groundwork will be laid for a hermeneutically-inspired analysis of relevant textual material.

The second method that will be used in this study is an interpretive-hermeneutic study of two psycho-spiritual texts; one situated within the Sufi tradition and the other within the Zen Buddhist tradition. The first text is a poem written by the Persian Sufi master Farid ud-Din Attar (c. 1145 – c. 1221) and is popularly known as *The Conference of the Birds*. This poem is an allegorical account of the spiritual journey within the context of the Sufi tradition, and has been studied as a source of spiritual guidance by Sufis for several centuries. The relevance of this text to the purposes of the present study is that it serves as a psycho-
spiritually nuanced account of the spiritual journey as it is experienced and understood in the Sufi tradition. Moreover, this poem provides descriptions of the psycho-spiritual peaks and abysses experienced by the spiritual traveler at each successive stage of spiritual development.

The second text will draw on a series of ten images and short poems collectively known as the “Zen Ox Herding Pictures”. Authorship of the original text is difficult to pinpoint, with the earliest attribution of authorship belonging to Ching-Chu in the 11th century. What is more important than individual authorship regarding these texts is the fact that they have been used for the pedagogical instruction of students of Zen Buddhism for several centuries. Two translations and associated commentaries will be used, one by Red Pine (2015) and the other by Yamada & Hori (2004). Collectively, the “Zen Ox Herding Pictures” are intended to represent the successive stages of psychological clarification that culminate in the experience of enlightenment/awakening within the Zen Buddhist tradition.

The method that will be used to engage with these texts is inspired by an interpretive-hermeneutic methodology developed by Gadamer (1960/2006) and Heidegger (1927/1962), amongst others. The methodological notion of the hermeneutic circle, in particular, has influenced the development of this method. While the autoethnographic portion of this study will be devoted to articulating the fore-structures of understanding that the author brings to the hermeneutic work, the interpretive-hermeneutic method to follow centers around the process of engaging with the texts themselves.

The guiding principle behind crafting the methods for this study is the notion that the methods should follow from the methodology, and that the methodology should follow from the nature of the phenomenon being studied. Given the religious and spiritual undertones that
give shape, form, and meaning to the otherwise abstract notion of self-surrender, it follows that a psycho-spiritually grounded methodology be employed, and thus that the methods emerging from such a methodology contain a contemplative element as well.

To this end, the interpretive-hermeneutic method that will be used to study the psycho-spiritually oriented texts will incorporate a contemplative element. This will be accomplished by the researcher participating in contemplative practices that are relevant to the spiritual tradition from which each text emerged. For the Sufi text, the author will engage in traditional Sufi contemplative practice, remembrance (dhikr), which is centered on the invocation of God while in a state of contemplative absorption. For the Zen Buddhist text, the researcher will engage in zazen, seated meditation that may begin with cultivating concentration through focus on the breath and may transition into the practice of bare attention (Shikantaza).

The preparatory contemplative practices will last for thirty minutes, and immediately afterwards the researcher will begin reading the relevant text. This practice constitutes one aspects of the hermeneutic method being used in this study and will serve two primary purposes: (1) to assist with opening up to the alterity of the texts, (2) to facilitate access to the perspective (i.e., the psychological depths) from which these texts emerged, and which they describe. Regarding the latter point, it is important to mention that these texts would risk being misunderstood (or else understood superficially) if approached in a simply conventional manner, especially given that these texts serve as invitations to experientially assimilate the trans-rational insights that are being communicated.

It is expected that the study will include at least four readings of each text while intentionally sustaining a meditative-like mode of attending. The first reading will be oriented
around assimilating the material and making note of thematic categories relevant to the subject of self-surrender. The second reading will involve highlighting and coding of relevant passages in each text that may be related to self-surrender. It is also important to note that coding will be used here as an interpretive process, one which is based on the evidence of the text. Additionally, the third and fourth readings will focus on the passages from each text that have been selected for their relevance to the study, and will involve a contemplative engagement with these passages.

Additionally, during the third and fourth readings the researcher will engage closely with the relevant passages by meditating on their meaning in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the material. The significance of the third and fourth readings are that they follow from prior contemplative as well as analytic engagement with the texts. It is expected that this process may facilitate the assimilation of new or deeper understanding as a result of the hermeneutic process. Although the hermeneutic circle/spiral is one that can be carried repeated indefinitely without the risk of it becoming a vicious circle, given that each reading paves the way for new structures of understanding, for the purposes of this study, a fourth reading has been deemed sufficient to complete the hermeneutic project.

Within Sufi tradition, the practice of contemplative reflection is known as intellection/contemplation (tafakkur). Similarly, within the Zen tradition, the closest parallel is perhaps Koan practice, whereby the meditator takes as their object of meditation an apparently paradoxical question or story designed to facilitate nondual insight into the nature of reality. In this spirit, the researcher will meditate on “The Zen Oxherding Pictures” themselves, as well as on the relevant passages from the corresponding commentaries.

After a final reading of the texts, the researcher will organize the findings from this
study and present them in a structural form; that is, with distinct structures for Sufism and Zen Buddhism. The researcher will then articulate the key themes that constitute the meaning-structure of the experience, including the interrelationship between themes. Additionally, evidence for key themes will be provided through the use of illustrative quotes from the source material. Similarities and differences between the results from the interpretive-hermeneutic work with each text will then be explored, and readers will be invited to draw their own conclusions regarding the psycho-spiritual significance of self-surrender. Finally, the researcher will reflexively examine his pre-understandings regarding the texts as well as more generally around the phenomenon of self-surrender in light of the new understandings cultivated through the interpretive-hermeneutic & contemplative processes, thus completing the hermeneutic circle.

**Summary of Procedures**

**Autoethnographic Method**

1. Reflect on and articulate core experiences relevant to the phenomenon of self-surrender (i.e., developmental/disruptive experiences).

2. Reflect on & articulate core beliefs around self-surrender. Additionally, given that beliefs are always lived, felt, and embodied, this will also involve examining the relationship between core experiences and core beliefs. This process will also serve as a component of the researcher’s hermeneutic reflexivity (i.e., through highlighting the author’s fore-conceptions).

3. At various points throughout the interpretative process, and upon completion of the author’s analysis of each text, the author will reflect on and articulate ways in which fore-understandings may have influenced and colored his interpretations of the texts.
and will allow for interpretations to be revised accordingly.

**Interpretive-Hermeneutic Method**

[To be conducted with each psycho-spiritual text]

Note: While these procedures will systematically guide the research at each step, they are presented here for illustrative purposes only. The hermeneutic process can never be linear, but rather circular or spiraling.

1. First reading: The purpose of the first reading is to experience the text in its wholeness. The first reading will be immersive and will intentionally exclude any analysis or note-taking.

2. Second reading: The purpose of the second reading will be to highlight and code passages in the text that may relate to the phenomenon of self-surrender. Additionally, coding will be based on themes and meaning structures that emerge during the second reading process.

3. Third & Fourth readings: The purpose of the third and fourth reading will be to continue the hermeneutic circle/spiral through conducting two final readings of the text. The third and fourth readings will be one’s in which the researcher remains open and attentive to new meanings and thematic relationships that may emerge in the texts.

**Texts:**


Note: Clarifying ontological assumptions & critical use of religious discourse:

Given the contemplative nature of this study, as well as the psycho-spiritual significance of the phenomenon being studied, this study will embrace aspects of religious/spiritual discourse. In so doing, my hope is to conceptually enrich this study through drawing on time-honored discourse that deals with the phenomenon of self-surrender. For example, in the autoethnographic portion, as well as in the results and discussion sections of the dissertation, I use the word “God” to contextualize and ontologically situate the phenomenon of self-surrender in the context of my own belief-structures as well as Sufi tradition. In doing so, however, I want to recognize the fact that religious discourse and the ontological assumptions carried within them (i.e. through words/concepts such as “God” or “Original/Essential Nature”) may not resonate with all readers, or may do so in markedly different ways. For this reason, I invite readers to substitute their own preferred symbolism and corresponding ontologies/meaning-structures when encountering these words in the text.

Additionally, I believe that taking up religious discourse in an academic context necessitates a critical and contextualizing commentary in order to be academically-robust and accessible to diverse audiences. The word “God”, in particular, is one which merits critical consideration, given the multiplicity of emotional, ontological, and existential meanings that it carries for different people. Adams (2017) effectively expresses this point when he writes that “The word God is one of countless names that have been bestowed on the one sacred, unnamable, nondual, participatory mystery” (Adams, 2017, p.13). It is with this recognition of the inability of language to express the inexpressible or to define what is, by its essence, beyond all definition, that the word “God” is used in this study.
Chapter 4: Findings

Autoethnography: Core-Experiences

Preliminary Note: Rationale for Selection of Core Experiences

The process of selecting a relatively limited number of experiences to represent my core-experiences of self-surrender was challenging because it inevitably involved choosing to include certain experiences at the expense of others. During the initial process of deciding which experiences to include, I decided on four sets of experiences. The first was a short description of the early years of my life that were lived without any awareness of self-surrender as an experiential possibility. I felt it important to include this section because the uncertainty and confusion that characterized this phase of my life served as the catalyst for my own search for an alternative way of being-in-the-world that eventually led me to self-surrender. Secondly, I chose my contact with Eastern philosophy as a second core-experience because Taoism, Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta were the first psychospiritual perspectives that I encountered and studied in-depth. Relatedly, I chose to include my trip to India as a core-experience of self-surrender because it was on this trip that I first encountered individuals who were knowledgeable about self-surrender, and who passed some of this knowledge on to me. Lastly, I chose to describe a period of uncertainty and confusion during my mid-twenties because this experience resulted in one of the most transformative experiences of self-surrender that I have experienced.

Early years

Perhaps my most poignant experiences concerning self-surrender are the many years that I spent being entirely oblivious to this way of being-in-the-world. Prior to coming into contact with Eastern philosophy, and later on, with Sufism, my worldview and corresponding
way of being-in-the-world was guided almost entirely by a very different set of values. I was socialized into a modern worldview that was implicitly materialistic in multiple senses of the world. I learned to value my education and future professional development as primary sources of meaning in life, alongside family and friendship. At age 20, I began to feel a profound absence of life-meaning, an absence that neither friendship nor careerism could satisfy. It was the psychological restlessness generated from this experience of meaninglessness that kindled my search for existential meaning and eventual contact with several of the world’s spiritual traditions.

Contact with Eastern Philosophy:

One of the core experiences that catalyzed my interest in self-surrender as both an experiential possibility as well as an existential ideal was my contact with Eastern philosophy. I first discovered Eastern philosophy while living in Vancouver, Canada, shortly after having moved there to begin undergraduate studies. I was nineteen at the time, and had recently decided to move out of student housing and into a small apartment to have more time to myself. I had grown weary of the undergraduate experience I was previously been immersed in; a world of hyper-sociality that was enjoyable but ultimately unsatisfying. This was a turbulent time in my life; one wherein I began to question the basic premises that had led me to Canada for my education. I originally applied to university to study International Relations under the premise that this would be a stepping stone to a career in international law. However, after a year of undergraduate study, I realized that this was not the path for me. It was in this state of pronounced uncertainty and existential confusion that I began to search for alternative existential bearings.

My first contact with Eastern philosophy came through two texts, which I read
simultaneously: the *Tao Te Ching*, and the *Book of Chuang-Tzu*. Reading these Taoist texts produced a gradual transformation in terms of the way that I understood myself and the world around me. Reading the *Tao Te Ching* instilled in me a sense of awe, as well as a recognition of the superficiality of my understanding of the world. It also led me to realize the existence of alternative ways of being-in-the-world; ways which seemed somehow primordial and in harmony with the cosmos – or as Lao-Tzu might say, in harmony with the nature of things. I remember most clearly, while reading the *Tao Te Ching*, a tremendous sense of excitement and wonder. I quickly memorized the first few lines from the renowned translation by Mitchell (1994), and they reverberated in my mind and heart for months to come:

“The tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal Name. The unnamable is the eternally real. Naming is the origin of all particular things. Free from desire, you realize the mystery. Caught in desire, you see only the manifestations. Yet mystery and manifestations arise from the same source. This source is called darkness. Darkness within darkness. The gateway to all understanding” (Lao-Tzu & Mitchell, 1994, p. 1).

It was the idea that there exists a way of being in the world that is somehow primordial, in harmony with the cosmos, and essentially meaningful that appealed greatly to me. I wondered what it meant to be free from desire, and how this might be realized within the context of my life in the modern world. Additionally, the Taoist concept of non-doing (*wu wei*) struck me as profoundly meaningful, though at the time, I could scarcely understand its meaning. Rather, what I knew most clearly at that time was that the cultural and existential bearings that I had inherited from the world around me had failed to imbue my life with purpose and significance. Around me I saw decent but dissatisfied people; I saw busy, overworked, anxious, and generally neurotic young adults pursuing life-trajectories characterized by self-interest, the pursuit of gratification, and self-aggrandizement. And when
I finally looked within myself, I saw the same.

**Trip to India**

During the summer of my sophomore year, I travelled to India with a good friend whose family lived in Mumbai. It so happened that my friend’s father was well-versed in Hindu philosophy, and I was surprised to learn that he followed the same spiritual tradition that I had been reading about for some months prior to our trip, Advaita Vedanta. I remember staying up all night speaking with Mr. C about Eastern philosophy, metaphysics, and the spiritual path. What most impressed me about Mr. C was that, in articulating his understanding of Eastern philosophy, he drew not only on Advaita Vedanta, but also on Buddhism, Sufism, and Taoism. “There are many roads that lead to the mountain peak”, he told me, and that what mattered was to begin walking.

During our travels, my friend and I visited some of the most sacred places in India. We visited the Hindu Golden Temple in Amritsar, several Buddhist temples in Dharmasala, and the Haji Ali mosque in Bombay. One experience, in particular, that moved me greatly was observing a Hindu cremation ceremony in Varanasi, the oldest city in India. It was close to 11:00 p.m. when the funeral pyre came alight. My friend and I were on a boat on the Ganges at the time, and we watched in silent amazement as family members participated in a cremation ceremony that culminated with the departed person’s ashes being laid in the Ganges. Our guide on the boat explained to us that by releasing the ashes of the deceased into the Ganges, their soul is liberated from the death/rebirth cycle and reintegrated with its source. What struck me most me, however, was the fact that this funeral was not an occasion for mourning for the family but rather of celebration. I learned that, prior to the cremation ritual, the family marched through the city in celebration of the person’s life. Moreover, the
framework of understanding through which the family made meaning both of life and death seemed to allow them a sense of serenity, acceptance, and peaceful surrender to this cosmic process.

*Surrender to uncertainty*

I remember a time in my life that was characterized by prolonged anxiety and a strong sense of uncertainty. I was living in New York and applying for doctoral programs in Clinical Psychology. The application process took several months and was followed by a quiet period while applicants waited to receive invitations to interview from programs. It was during this period that I felt most anxious, and it was also around this time when I first turned to contemplative practice as a source of support. I remember one day in particular, during which I had been ruminating about my chances of admission into various programs, that I felt moved to sit in silence, and to silently invoke one of the names of God. This practice, known within the Sufi tradition as *dhikr*, which translates to “remembrance” in English, is a foundational contemplative practice in this tradition. I remember the profound sense of both release and relief that I felt during this time.

Sitting in silence and invoking one of the names of the Divine, I was simultaneously remembering God and forgetting myself. My attention gradually shifted from a neurotic preoccupation with the uncertain outcome of my efforts towards a grounded awareness of the presence of God within my own heart. It is difficult to put this experience into words, because it was so visceral, so immediate and so personal that to put it into words seems to detract from it. Nonetheless, what I remember is this: in practicing *dhikr*, I felt myself enveloped by a sense of loving tenderness and mercy. Additionally, the remembrance of God necessarily entailed a recognition and acceptance that the outcome of my efforts to become a clinical
psychologist was not in my hands. It was this realization that allowed me to experience a sense of surrender. In recognizing the omnipresence of the Divine, in those moments, I was able to appreciate the fragility, vulnerability, and complete ontological dependence of myself as a human being, and to let go of the need for the illusion of control. Since that time, I have often turned to contemplative practice during times of anxiety, uncertainty, and hardship.

**Autoethnography: Core-Beliefs**

Before exploring my core-beliefs regarding the phenomenon of self-surrender, it will be useful to reflect on some of the challenges I experienced while attempting to articulate them initially. One of the primary challenges was my sense that these core beliefs needed to be sequentially elaborated in such a way that was both fully coherent and exhaustive. I found myself writing paragraphs and then deleting them because, at some level, the content seemed to either contradict itself or else lack a linear chain of reasoning that would allow me to eventually arrive at a coherent and well-rounded representation of my core-beliefs around the psychological and spiritual significance of self-surrender. I did this a number of times before realizing that the expectations that I had set for myself were unrealistic; they were unrealistic because my understanding of self-surrender is itself imperfect, multidimensional, and both limited and enriched by my own lived-experience of this phenomenon. Moreover, I believe that there this is something about the nature of self-surrender that is itself paradoxical and multidimensional, an assumption that I will explore in more detail below.

Additionally, after reflecting on my core-beliefs, I realized that my objective is not to present a fully-formed, internally-consistent, and exhaustive representation of the phenomenon of self-surrender. Rather, my goal is to articulate, as clearly as possible the multiple layers of meaning and significance that this phenomenon has for me at this time, in
order to fore-ground my assumptions and true-prejudices about this phenomenon. The overarching goal of this practice is, of course, not to control for or eliminate my pre-conceptions, but rather to fore-ground them in awareness so that, upon beginning the contemplative-hermeneutic analysis, I will not simply find what I already knew about self-surrender in the texts. Instead, the goal of articulating one’s core-beliefs prior to the textual hermeneutic process is to create the inner conditions that allow the researcher to make genuine contact with the text’s alterity, to the otherness of the text, and in doing so, to allow for the possibility of new or deeper understanding to emerge.

**Self-Surrender and the Ego**

One of the core assumptions that I hold about self-surrender as a psycho-spiritual process is that it necessarily and intimately implicates one’s egoic sense of self (i.e. that addresses the ways in which we identify as unique individuals through identification with our social/cultural identities, desires, values, etc.). Within the Sufi tradition, the ego is sometimes compared to a wild animal that must be tamed. In one teaching story that I remember, the role of the ego within the context of spiritual development was compared to the role of a horse in a carriage. The horse provides the ‘horsepower’, the dynamism and energy, but requires a skilled driver in order to be steered along the right path. Within this context, self-surrender can be understood as a process by which the horse (i.e. the ego with its associated drives, inclinations, and passions) learns to submit to the authority of the driver (one’s deepest self).

In other words, I believe that one aspect of self-surrender involves the ego’s surrendering the illusion of control. The ego’s sense of being in control can be said to constitute an illusion inasmuch as egoic identity is itself a mental construct that lacks any substantial reality outside the domain of social phantasy. In other words, the ego assumes that
it is the one steering the carriage, when in fact, it is driven by impulses, passions, and desires which it has as a consequence of having been captured by a highly contracted and narrow understanding of self and world. If self-surrender is understood as a process that involves the ego surrendering its illusory sense of control, two essential questions seem to follow: (1) how does the ego ‘surrender’ itself, and to what/whom does it surrender to?

**Self-Surrender and agency**

My understanding of the nature of self-surrender is that this phenomenon is not one which a person can accomplish or attain strictly through personal striving or intentional effort. An element of ‘grace’ is necessary for the actualization of self-surrender as a way of being-in-the-world. Another way to formulate this is that it is not ego which attains self-surrender (the ego is, in a sense, the very thing being surrendered), but rather a transpersonal aspect of one’s deepest Self that emerges to the forefront of one’s consciousness and allows for the lived-experience of self-surrender. That being said, I do believe that a great deal of personal striving and effort is necessary in order to overcome very deeply ingrained psychological and behavioral tendencies towards self-centeredness.

**A Personal Definition**

Being situated in the Sufi tradition, my understanding of self-surrender is primarily as an experiential possibility that is symbolically represented within a monotheistic framework; one that necessarily carries multiple layers of meaning and which can be understood on several different levels. If pressed to give a succinct definition of my personal understanding of self-surrender, I would say this: An experience of loving self-surrender to God, wherein an individual simultaneously surrenders the illusion of self-sufficiency and recognizes their total ontological dependence on God, the source of all Being. Additionally, I believe that there are
other, equally valid, ways of conceptualizing self-surrender that do not draw on monotheistic discourse, such as can be seen through Buddhism and Taoism.

**Self-Surrender and Love**

Another core belief I hold concerning self-surrender is that it necessarily involves the experience of love. Within the context of monotheistic traditions, this love is primarily directed from God towards creation, and following from this, we love accordingly. Additionally, this love is often experienced as feelings of tenderness, openness, gratitude, and awe. I believe that the experience of loving self-surrender as a psycho-spiritual process also leads to love and compassion towards all beings. I imagine that this has to do with the fact that the process of self-surrender leads to a decentering of the ego as the axis upon which one’s inner world revolves, and thus frees up room for one’s interest and compassion to flow outwards. Self-surrender also expresses itself as love towards those manifestations of mercy that provided human beings with the means by which to approach self-surrender (i.e. prophets, avatars, spiritual guides).

**Self-Surrender and Paradox**

An additional core-belief around self-surrender that I hold is that this phenomenon is inherently paradoxical. One of the central paradoxes of self-surrender is beautifully expressed in the following lines of the *Tao Te Ching*:

“If you want to become whole, let yourself be partial. If you want to become straight, let yourself be crooked. If you want to become full, let yourself be empty. If you want to be reborn, let yourself die. If you want to be given everything, give everything up” (Lao-Tzu & Mitchell, 1994, p.2).

These lines convey something of the paradox of self-surrender; particularly through the idea that if one wishes to become a “whole” human being, one must let themselves
become “empty”. Another way of expressing this is that it is paradoxically through becoming less self-centered that we truly affirm ourselves. Relatedly, in learning to seek happiness through caring for others, one becomes happier as well. It is also worth mentioning that the existential possibilities offered through self-surrender, in many ways, seem to contradict some of the basic contemporary cultural assumptions around the meaning of happiness and the means to attain it. Contrary to the idea that the accumulation of wealth and the corresponding multiplication of desire can serve as an avenue to attaining lasting happiness, the world’s psycho-spiritual traditions have long recognized the futility of such pursuits. The wisdom behind these understandings express themselves clearly through the ways that different traditions have engaged with the phenomenon of self-surrender.

Chapter 5: Results

Contextual Summary of the Texts


*The Conference of the Birds* is an allegorical poem written by the Sufi mystic-poet Farid ud-Din Attar in the late 12th century. The poem tells the story of a gathering of birds from around the world, who are meeting with the common purpose of deciding on a king to lead and govern them. The birds ask for advice from the wise hoopoe, and are told of a righteous king, the Simorgh. The mythical Simorgh resides in a far distant land that can only be reached by passing through seven perilous valleys, which each represents the progressive stages of the spiritual quest.

The birds, each of whom symbolizes a different psychological obstacle on the spiritual journey, set out in large numbers, but only thirty make it to the abode of the
Simorgh. The poem ends with a narration of the encounter between the birds and the Simorgh, and can be summarized in the following line: “Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far, it is yourselves you see and what you are” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 235). In other words, upon completing their journey, the birds experientially recognized that Simorgh was a reflection of their own essential nature.


The original “Zen Oxherding Pictures” are difficult to place in term of original authorship because there have been several versions and variations across many centuries. Nonetheless, what remains constant throughout the different versions is the use of the metaphor of the herdsman and the ox to illustrate the psycho-spiritual development of the student of Zen and the culmination of this development in the experience of enlightenment. Additionally, it is important to mention that although the various versions of the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” often draw on both text and images in a mutually complimentary way, this study will limit itself to focusing on textual representation. The “Zen Oxherding Pictures” usually begin with a wandering herdsman in search of his ox, which metaphorically represents the herdsman’s original nature. As the story unfolds, the lost herdsman finds and catches his ox, and begins the task of taming it. After long and difficult training, the herdsman eventually forgets about the ox (i.e. interiorizes his original nature and thus no longer regards the ox as something that exists outside of himself).

In the final stages of development, the herdsman, having tamed his ox, learns to forget both the ox and himself. This is the stage that Otsu (1969) calls “The complete oblivion of
both ox and herdsman” (Otsu, 1969, p. 19). Finally, the herdsman ‘returns home on the back of the ox’, and, out of compassion for others, re-enters the marketplace in order to free others from suffering. The two versions of the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” that will be used in this study are Red Pine’s translation of *P’u Ming's Oxherding Pictures & Verses* and *The Ox and His Herdsman*, which includes commentary by the Zen Abbot, Rekido Otsu. The present study will draw on both texts interchangeably in order to present the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” from multiple points of view, and to represent the oxherding metaphor as a coherent whole.

**Thematic Analysis & Hermeneutic Analysis of Meaning Structures:**

1. **Lack, confusion, and insufficiency as common points of departure**

   One of the first implicit themes that emerged during my reading of the texts was the sense of lack, insufficiency, discontentment, and disorder that characterizes the initial state of being of the protagonists in both texts. In *The Conference of the Birds*, the birds of the world assemble out of a recognition that their current mode of government lacks effective leadership and thus also lacks the ability to guarantee justice and harmony amongst the members of its society. We see this in the following lines:

   “The world’s birds gathered for their conference
   And said: ‘Our constitution makes no sense.
   All nations in the world require a king;
   How is it we alone have no such thing?
   Only a kingdom can be justly run;
   We need a king and must inquire for one”
   *(Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 49).*

   The birds of the world gathered out of a recognition that there is something lacking in their current form of government. In its present state, their constitution (i.e. both their laws and the guiding principles informing them) are unable to realize a just society. One
interpretation might be that the birds represent a community of individuals trying to live together in peace and harmony, but find themselves unable to do so without a leader to preserve their rights and guarantee justice. Such an interpretation, however, does not seem to align itself with the unambiguously metaphysical scope of this poem. Another way of interpreting The Conference of the Birds is as follows: the birds of the world represent not human society as such, but rather the *intrapsychic* life of the individual. Following from this premise, the birds’ recognition that their ‘constitution makes no sense’ can be understood to represent the individual’s recognition that their own mode of being in the world is disordered and out of balance. In other words, it is the recognition that one’s own inner constitution is both lacking and insufficient.

Within the context of the poem, this collective recognition of lack and incoherence leads the birds to assemble and resolve to find a king. Additionally, the birds’ recognition that their constitution ‘makes no sense’ is intimately bound up with the subsequent assertion that “All nations in the world require a king” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 61). The implied role of the king is to provide governance that is constitutionally justified and thus capable of running the kingdom justly. If by ‘kingdom’ we understand Attar to be referring to the individual, to the inner kingdom, then we can perhaps infer that the ‘king’ that the birds are seeking represents an inner organizing principle capable of conferring wholeness, unity, and harmony.

Similarly, in The Ox and His Herdsman, we encounter a solitary herdsman that is helplessly lost in the wilderness in search of his ox. Exhausted and without hope, the herdsman moves along a path that leads him deeper into the entanglement of the thickets and weeds. Textually, we see this in the opening lines of the poem:
“In an endless wilderness the lonely herdsman strides through thickets of weeds, searching for his ox. Wide flows the river, far rise the mountains and ever deeper into entanglement runs the path. Utterly exhausted and in despair; even so the searching herdsman finds no guiding direction. In the evening twilight he only hears the song of the cicadas in the trees. Facing outwards only the herdsman searches with all his might. His feet are already in a deep and muddy swamp but he does not notice. How often in the sweetly smelling grass under the setting sun did he sing Hsin-feng, the song of the herdsman, in vain?” (Otsu, 1969, p.6).

Within the context of *The Ox and His Herdsman*, the ox is understood to represent the original nature of the herdsman, who initially finds himself in a state of self-estrangement. In his commentary on the pictures, Otsu (1969) makes two important points regarding the herdsman’s initial experience of alienation from his original nature: The first is that “The ox has never been missing from the beginning”, which draws attention to the fact that the herdsman’s experience of having lost his original nature, is both true and not true (Otsu, 1969, p. 5). It is experientially true, because this description accurately represents the lived-experience of the herdsman. But it is not absolutely true, in an ontological sense, because the herdsman’s original nature has always been with him and will always be with him. This is because the original nature is, just that, the herdsman’s original nature – his deepest self.

The belief that human beings “possess” an essential, universal, and unchanging “original nature” is one that is shared across several of the world’s religious and spiritual traditions. This is significant because a psychospiritual tradition’s understanding of what constitutes the original nature of human beings speaks directly to its underlying ontology as well as to the values and ideals to which that tradition adheres. Moreover, although human beings may possess an original or essential nature, it is also clear that the ways that individuals choose to live their lives determines the extent to which their personalities and behavior will conform to their original nature. Within the context of Zen
Buddhism, the original nature of human beings is conceptualized in terms of the essential nonduality of subject and object; that is, through a primordial mode of experiencing that recognizes the profound interconnection of all beings.

Another way this has been expressed is in terms of the Buddha nature that all beings contain within themselves, or more accurately, that all beings essentially *are*. As Suzuki (2010) explains, “Buddha nature is our original nature; we have it before we practice zazen [meditation], and before we acknowledge it in terms of consciousness…when you give up trying to understand it, true understanding is always there” (Suzuki, 2010, p. 125). The existential significance of this perspective is that all beings are understood to inherently possess the capacity for spiritual enlightenment or awakening. Moreover, the Zen conception of the original nature of human beings speaks directly to a way of being-in-the-world that allows for harmony and balance with regard to the individual’s relationship to others. In other words, when an individual acts from their original nature, there is no intentional effort to be “good” or kind to others, and yet the individual’s behavior reflects these qualities effortlessly.

This is because acting and living from one’s original nature implies a nondual mode of being in which others are not seen as being separate or outside of one’s self. Put differently, to live in harmony with one’s original nature implies living from the experiential recognition that all beings are profoundly interconnected and that one’s self is not separate from the selfhood of others. Thus, one’s happiness is also not seen as separate from the happiness of others and neither is the suffering of others seen as separate from one’s own suffering. Additionally, within the context of Buddhist psychology and ontology, the notion of one’s “original nature” or “original heart” refers
to the understanding that all sentient beings are endowed with an innate intelligence, or Buddha nature, whose primary characteristic consists of the fact that it is a nondualistic mode of being, interrelating, experiencing, and understanding; and one that is essentially free from delusion. It is also important to note here that the notion of “possessing” or “acquiring” one’s original nature is descriptively useful but not entirely accurate. This is because human beings do not “possess” their original nature, but rather are their original nature.

Delusion, in this sense, is a technical term that refers to the myriad processes of identifying with narrow and dualistic understandings of selfhood (i.e. such as identifying with one’s desires and particularly with identifying exclusively with one’s supposedly separate body-mind), which in turn, leads to suffering and self-estrangement. Additionally, as Baroni (2002) explains, “If one is freed from all delusions, one will see one’s true nature and attain enlightenment” (Baroni, 2002, p. 163). Enlightenment, from this perspective, refers to the surrendering of one’s limited and narrow understanding of selfhood and the actualization of a new mode of being-in-the-world that is characterized by living “from” one’s original nature. But what might this actually look like in one’s daily life? To live from, as, and through one’s original nature implies a mode of relating to the world that is characterized by compassion and simplicity; it is to experience the world (i.e. the natural world and, more broadly, all beings and presences) as a part of one’s deeper, transpersonal self. In other words, the pain of another person is experienced as one’s own pain, and so too with their joy and happiness. Through this mode of being, compassion, generosity, and kindness flow effortlessly.

Returning to the texts, the second point that Otsu (1969) makes regarding the
herdsman’s experience of alienation from his original nature is that “…it so happened that the herdsman turned away from himself; thus, his own ox became a stranger to him and eventually lost himself in far, dusty regions” (Otsu, 1969, p. 5). The herdsman’s ‘turning away from himself’ represents an experience of inner-alienation; one in which the herdsman’s original nature, his ox, seems to escape. The search for the ox then becomes the point of departure for *The Ox and His Herdsman*.

2. Worldliness and unrestrained desire as common sources of error and hindrance along the way

Another thematic element shared between both of these texts is their representation of worldliness and unrestrained, passionate desire as common sources of confusion, error, and hindrance along their respective spiritual paths. As mentioned above, both texts begin by representing their protagonists as existing in a state of disharmony, confusion, and insufficiency; the birds are lacking a constitution that makes sense and are in need of a king, and the herdsman is lost and in search of his ox. Both descriptions can thus be said to represent a human being’s psycho-spiritual need for wholeness, inner equilibrium, and intrapsychic harmony.

Within the context of *The Conference of the Birds*, the metaphor of the birds in need of a king is also meant to symbolically represent the psychological state of disequilibrium that characterizes the individual that is dominated by self-centered desire and unrestrained passions. The need for a king thus speaks to the need for an inner organizing principle that can effectively regulate one’s inner world, which contains within itself strong passions and tendencies towards excess, as can be seen in the following lines from Attar’s poem:

“Though others see them, you have not the art to recognize the passions in your heart. There is a den in you where dragons thrive; Your folly keeps the prowling beasts alive –By day and night you watch them sleep and eat and cosset them, and toss them blood-soaked meat...”
"A myriad promises beguile your mind," are all that you can find. What are such flames? Tread down the world’s desire, and like a lion shun this raging fire. Accomplish this, and you will find your heart; There waits your palace, pure in every part. Fire blocks the path, the goal is long delayed –Your heart’s a captive and your soul’s afraid, but in the midst of such an enterprise You will escape this universe of lies. When worldly pleasures cloy, prepare to die –The world gives neither name nor truth, pass by! The more you see of it the less you see, how often must I warn you to break free?” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 254).

The art of recognizing the passions in one’s heart is the capacity for sincere introspection and the wisdom to recognize when one’s heart is in a state of disequilibrium. The den where dragons thrive is the heart that is given to unrestrained desire, greed, etc., and the dragons here represent the unregulated selfish desires of the supposedly self-sufficient and contracted ego (i.e. beasts that breathe fire, which represent the burning-quality of desire). More accurately, turning to P’u Ming’s Oxherding Pictures and Verses, we see in the first picture and corresponding verses a characterization of a similarly unrestrained, passionate, and undisciplined psychological state in the herdsman:

“Untamed: a raging ox with menacing horns runs away across hills and streams where black clouds shroud the valley who knows what sprouts lie crushed”
(Pu’Ming & Pine, 2015, p.2)

The raging ox with menacing horns here represents the state of the herdsman who has ‘turned away’ from his original nature and has thus become lost to himself. Additionally, the herdsman is lost because he has become attached to worldly desire and erroneous opinions which leads him further down the ‘path of entanglement’. The ox is described as ‘raging’ and as having ‘menacing horns’ to illustrate the passionate and potentially dangerous nature of this state of mind. Black clouds are said to cover the valley, which thus prevent the light of understanding from entering and nurturing the sprouts – which represent the herdsman’s
innate capacity for illumination. Additionally, consider the following descriptions of the herdsman’s initial state of being given by Otsu (1969):

“Desire for profit and fear of loss flare up like a flaming conflagration and views of right and wrong arise in opposition to one another, like spears on the battlefield” (Otsu, 1969, p. 5).

“He cannot yet detach himself from the desire for the sweet grass. Stubborn self-will rages in him and wild animal nature rules him…” (Otsu, 1969, p. 11).

“An endless wilderness extends as far as the herdsman can see. If he looks at himself all he sees is a worldly man who is lost in error... The river “desire” runs deep, the mountain “self-will” rises high...” (Otsu, 1969, p.39).

“He wants to devote himself to the truth and be the equivalent of the Buddhas and masters, but the ocean of erroneous passions and opinions and the mountain of self-will make it hard for him to suddenly awaken to himself and become Buddha” (Otsu, 1969, p. 39).

Interestingly, we find a common use of symbolic language in the texts’ descriptions of desire as having the attributes of fire. In The Ox and His Herdsman, we are told that “Desire for profit and fear of loss flare up like a flaming conflagration…” and in The Conference of the Birds, we are told of the flames of greed, the fire that blocks the path, and the fire-breathing beast that represents the passionate tendencies in the heart (Otsu, 1969, p. 5). More importantly, however, we find that these classical texts both emphasize the obstructive force that unexamined worldliness and unrestrained desire have on the individual undertaking a spiritual quest. It is also important to clarify that the term worldliness is being used here to refer to the unexamined and unrestrained pursuit of selfish desire and material interests.

However, this is not at all to suggest that either Zen or Sufi tradition discourage or frown-upon ordinary aspects of human life, of which desire is a part. To the contrary, if we understand worldliness to refer to participation in the human experience, and to one’s connection with the phenomenal world, more generally, then both traditions certainly admit
the value and necessity of such aspects of experience. It is, rather, the extent of one’s attachment, valuation, and identification with these aspects of human existence, to the exclusion of all else, that is being referred to in this study as ‘unexamined worldliness’.

Moreover, Zen and Sufi perspectives on the psychospiritual significance of the body and its drives stand in contrast to otherworldly perspectives that one-sidedly emphasize detachment from the body and disdain for bodily desires. Laing (1960) alludes to such perspectives when he writes that: “It is possible to suggest from another point of view that the individual should try to disentangle himself from his body and thereby achieve a desired state of disincarnate spirituality” (Laing, 1960, p.69). Far from advocating a form of ‘disincarnate spirituality’, the Zen and Sufi psychospiritual paradigms emphasize the importance of an embodied, vital, and compassionate mode of being-in-the-world.

3. Surrendering self-will

Another thematic element shared between both texts is their emphasis on surrendering self-will, which is rooted in egocentric desire. In both texts, the protagonists find themselves in a state of disharmony and confusion owing, in part, to having become entangled in the snare of worldliness. It is thus not surprising to find that both texts emphasize the centrality of disciplining and taming the self in order for the protagonists to progress in their quests.

Moreover, it is also worth mentioning the thematic significance of what Otsu (1969) describes as “stubborn self-will” in both texts. In addition to the impediment that excessive worldliness and desire present along the way, the individual’s attachment to their own egocentric self-direction or self-will presents itself as a common obstacle in both texts. In The Conference of the Birds, the birds of the world recognize their need for guidance if they are to find a king. The hoopoe then emerges as a natural choice, given that he is the wisest of the
birds. However, it is not simply the hoopoe’s wisdom that makes him their guide. On the hoopoe’s beak is etched in Arabic: *bissmil’lah alrahman-alrahim*, which translates to “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”, which is the sacred formula that consecrates the beginning of virtually every action of significance in the daily lives of Muslims, from eating to canonical prayers. Moreover, the attributes of mercy and compassion are understood to constitute two of the essential qualities of the Divine.

It is because the hoopoe acts “In the name of God” and not for the sake of self-interest (i.e. desire for power, prestige, etc.) that he is able to lead the birds along the path of self-surrender. In other words, the hoopoe both embodies and symbolizes the state of self-surrender, and his significance in relation to the birds can be interpreted in at least two ways: In the first, the hoopoe represents legitimate spiritual authority that expresses itself in the personhood of a guide, teacher, or spiritual master. In the second interpretation, the hoopoe symbolizes the heart-intellect, a trans-rational faculty within the birds themselves that is innately predisposed to the pursuit of truth.

At this point it is important to elucidate the notion of the heart/heart-intellect within the broader context of the Sufi tradition. The notion of the heart or, interchangeably, the heart-intellect, refers to a mode of understanding and experiencing that stems from the innate intelligence of one’s original nature (*fitra*). Within the context of Sufi psychology, the original nature of human beings is characterized by merciful love, compassion, and generosity – qualities that are themselves understood to be reflections of the essential attributes of God (i.e. as can be seen through the concept of *imago dei*, that human beings are created in the image of God). Moreover, the heart-intellect is also understood as a trans-rational faculty that facilitates a nondual mode of perception and
correspondingly nondual mode of being-in-the-world. For the Sufis, the experience of nonduality can be conceptually expressed through the theory of the unity of being (*wahdat al-wujud*), that was first espoused by the Sufi metaphysician Ibn Al-Arabi (Chittick, 1989). This mystical doctrine speaks directly to the essential non-separateness of all-beings both from each other and, ultimately, from God. In other words, it is the recognition that both one’s self as well as the selfhood of others is ultimately empty of any positive existence or reality outside of God, the unitary source of all being, that is both immanently present and transcendent.

The basic position of this perspective is that, because ultimately only God is real (i.e. in the sense of having a positive ontological reality), then the apparent reality of the phenomenal world can only be derived through its participation in the Divine reality. Although there is much more to the metaphysical basis of this perspective, of greater concern in this study are the existential and ethical implications of the heart-intellect and the nondual mode of perception that it facilitates. For example, when an individual experiences the world through their heart-intellect, the lines of demarcation between self and other become profoundly transformed. It is not that the individual loses the ability to see other people as other people and themselves as individuals. Rather, these apparent differences are experientially understood to be illusory through the simultaneous recognition that multiplicity emanates from a single, unified source. It is by virtue of this realization that one is ultimately empty of any separate existence from others (and from the world more generally), that the individual is able to recognize their profound inter-relationship with others. From this realization, love and mercy come forth freely and in abundance.

Returning to the text, it becomes clear that the hoopoe is as a symbol for the heart-
intellect, which guides the birds on their journey to the Simorgh, who represents their deepest self (their *fitra*) and thus also their essential nature. In either interpretation (i.e., whether the hoopoe is understood to represent a spiritual guide or one’s own innate predisposition towards realizing one’s original nature), equally significant is that the birds themselves recognize that, so long as they are caught in the snare of worldliness, their own ability to perceive reality and the path that leads to it is itself impaired. In other words, so long as desires and passions dominate the individual, he/she will be unable to discern the spiritual path, let alone progress on it. Textually, this can be seen in the following lines from *The Conference of the Birds*:

"They set out on the Way, a noble deed! Hardly had they begun when they agreed to call a halt: A leader’s what we need, they said, one who can bind and loose, one who will guide our self-conceit to what is true; we need a judge of rare ability to lead us over danger’s spacious sea; whatever he commands along the Way, we must, without recalcitrance, obey, until we leave this place of sin and pride and gain Kaf’s distant peak" (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p.169).

The one who will guide the birds from “self-conceit to what is true” will do so by virtue of the fact that he/she is able to “bind and loose” (i.e., discipline the self). Additionally, the birds recognize their need to obey the commands of their guide until they “leave this place of sin and pride”, in other words, until they are freed from attachment to selfish desires, as well as from their attachment to correspondingly narrow understandings of selfhood. Moreover, if one accepts the interpretive possibility that the guide here represents an inner guide or transpersonal intrapsychic faculty, then the meaning of this passage shifts significantly. If it is, in fact, the inner guide that the hoopoe represents, then we can interpret the aspirant’s challenge as surrendering their own egocentric desires or tendencies and allowing their innate intelligence to guide them “…beyond this plain of sin and pride…” (i.e.
beyond an egocentrically-dominated mode of being in the world), and towards ‘Kaf’\’s distant peak’ of psycho-spiritual realization.

Turning to the “Zen Oxherding Pictures”, we see a similar emphasis placed on the deleterious psycho-spiritual consequences of excessive self-will, particularly with regard to the obstacle that self-will presents for progressing along the spiritual path. Additionally, we see this theme expressed textually in the second stage of *P’u Ming’s Oxherding Pictures and Verses*:

“Taming Begun:
suddenly my rope is through its nose
it tries to run but I use the switch
a willful nature is hard to tame
a boy must pull with all his might”

*(Pu’Ming & Pine, 2015, p. 4)*

The ox is wild because of its willful nature, and its willful nature stems from the ox’s desire for comfort and sensory gratification. In other words, the ox is regarded as wild to the extent that it is dominated by self-will, and vice versa; the ox is regarded tame to the extent that it has surrendered its self-will to the herdsman. Otsu (1969) expresses this point clearly when explains that, in the second stage, the ox initially tries to run away from the herdsman because it is still dominated by its willful nature: “He cannot yet detach himself from the desire for the sweet grass. Stubborn self-will rages in him and wild animal nature rules him. If the herdsman wants to make the ox really gentle he must discipline him with the whip” (Otsu, 1969, p. 11). When Otsu writes that “wild animal nature rules him”, he is referring precisely to the Ox’s desire for the sweet grass, which symbolizes the undisciplined self’s excessive attachment to the world and its comforts.

There are, then, at least two important comparative elements between the texts with
regard to self-will and its relationship to self-surrender: First, both texts recognize the relationship between self-will, egocentricity, and excessive desire. Consider, for example, the following passage from *The Conference of the Birds*: “The world’s apparent joy cannot compare with what we seek – it isn’t worth a hair; Here the Self rages like an unquenched fire, and nothing satisfies the heart’s desire – encompass all the earth, you will not find one happy heart or one contented mind” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 287). It is the self that “rages like an unquenched fire”, but it does so through being fueled by “the heart’s desire”.

Similarly, Otsu (1969) writes: “Stubborn self-will rages in him and wild animal nature rules him” and “The river “desire” runs deep, the mountain self-will rises high” (Otsu, 1969, p. 11). In this way, he calls attention to the fact that it is the self that is inflamed by the unrestrained desire that is represented by the notion of “wild animal nature”. Second, both texts juxtapose self-will with psycho-spiritual maturation. For example, in *The Conference of the Birds*, the birds are able to arrive at the throne of the Simorgh only after surrendering their limited and constricted identities as essentially separate selves. Similarly, in *The Ox and His Herdsman*, the herdsman is able to interiorize the ox and begin his journey home only after the ox has surrendered its stubborn self-will. It might even be provisionally said that the self of the wild untamed ox is desire itself.

4. Taming the self and detachment

Another major theme that emerged in both texts was that of disciplining the self and detachment from worldly desire. In “The Zen Oxherding Pictures”, this theme is expressed through the metaphor of the ox and the herdsman. The herdsman begins his journey in search of his ox, though this search began not because the ox wandered off but because the
herdsman turned away from himself. Thus, the herdsman first finds traces of the ox within himself and subsequently is able to make genuine contact with his original nature.

However, the ox of the herdsman has become wild; it is dominated by desire for the sweet green grass. For this reason, the herdsman must tame his ox if he wishes to “…come home on the back of his ox” (Otsu, 1969, p. 16). Additionally, in the second sequence of P‘u Ming’s Oxherding Pictures & Verses, we see that it is precisely because “…a willful nature is hard to tame” that “…a boy must pull with all his might” (Pu’Ming & Pine, 2015, p. 4). In other words, the need for volitional effort on the part of the herdsman to catch and then tame his ox emerges as a result of the wildness that developed in the ox because of his attachment to the sweet green grass. Moreover, the theme of disciplining the self and of detachment express themselves clearly the following passage from The Ox and His Herdsman:

“Catching the Ox: After the greatest efforts the herdsman has caught the ox. The will is yet too obstinate and the impetus too strong, to break his wildness easily. At times the ox gets away and climbs distant plateaus. Then again he runs far off into deep places, filled with fog and clouds, and wants to hide. Grasp the rein harder, do not let go of the ox! Many, and the most subtle, faults are still not yet overcome. Even when the herdsman cautiously draws him by the nose with the rein, the ox occasionally turns round and wants to go back to the wilderness. Where the sweet grass reaches high into the sky, the herdsman has caught the ox. Not for a moment must he let go of the rein. The Way home beckons clearly to the herdsman— But he must still frequently stop with the ox by the blue river and on top of the green mountain”.

(Otsu, 1969, p. 12)

After having come into experiential contact with his original nature, the herdsman is still not yet able to sustain this mode of being because his ox is still wild. Additionally, this wildness expresses itself as an obstinate will; one that is still too strongly drawn to the sweet green grass and the blue river. At this stage, the herdsman must exert great effort keep his ox
from running off, and so the voice of his inner wisdom tells him to “Grasp the rein harder, do not let go of the ox!” (Otsu, 1969, p. 12). Moreover, if we understand the metaphor of the ox running away to represent the tendency of the mind to become scattered and immersed in the phenomenal world and the associated entanglement that this produces, then we are able to interpret the injunction to grasp the rein harder and to not let go of the ox as injunctions towards contemplation, detachment, and self-inquiry.

Otsu (1969) makes this point when he writes that “There is no way for the pupil to break into this sphere other than that of zazen and ceaseless hammering at himself” (Otsu, 1969, p. 32), and again: “With this unwavering determination he [the herdsman] wanders step by step through the luxuriant grass, across the river and over the mountains” (p. 39). In other words, what is cultivated is a form of open and non-judgmental awareness that strengthens the capacity for self-discipline. Through this practice of ‘hammering at oneself’ the herdsman develops the capacity to hold on to the reins of his ox, and is thus eventually able to move through the luxuriant grass without becoming ensnared by it.

In *The Conference of the Birds* there is also a strong emphasis placed on disciplining/taming the self and on detachment from worldly desires. There are two parts of the text in particular that emphasize these themes: (1) during the initial stage of the birds’ journey, and (2) upon the birds’ arrival at the Valley of Detachment. Early on in the poem, Attar, speaking through the character of the hoopoe, articulates his understanding of the psycho-spiritual significance of taming the self, and on detachment from worldly desire. The following lines are among several in the text that speak directly to these themes:

1. “The Self is like a mail coat – melt this steel to pliant wax with David’s holy zeal, And when its metal melts, like David you will melt with love and bid the Self adieu” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 56).

3. "...Until your heart’s free of ownership you cannot start –Since we must leave this prison and its pains, Detach yourself from all that it contains…” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 302).

4. “You must abandon all things that exist; Even the soul itself must be dismissed – Renounce its fellowship; it too must go, along with all you own and all you know. If you have made this world a place for sleep, your bed’s the load that makes the Way so steep Burn it! and pass beyond what merely seems; You can’t deceive the Truth with sleepy dreams. Let fear persuade you, and the fire is lit; Burn your bed now if you would rise from it” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 238).

5. “A myriad promises beguile your mind, But flames of greed are all that you can find. What are such flames? Tread down the world’s desire, and like a lion shun this raging fire. Accomplish this, and you will find your heart; There waits your palace, pure in every part. Fire blocks the path, the goal is long delayed –Your heart’s a captive and your soul’s afraid, but in the midst of such an enterprise You will escape this universe of lies. When worldly pleasures cloy, prepare to die [to one’s separate self]. The world gives neither name nor truth, pass by! The more you see of it the less you see, how often must I warn you to break free?” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 254).

6. “The world’s apparent joy cannot compare with what we seek – it isn’t worth a hair; Here the Self rages like an unquenched fire, And nothing satisfies the heart’s desire – Encompass all the earth, you will not find One happy heart or one contented mind” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 287).

7. “But if the heart can rule, then day and night This dog [the self] will labour for the heart’s delight, and when the heart rides out he sprints away Eager to flush his noble master’s prey. Whoever chains this dog will find that he commands…” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 223).

In the first quote, we find a simile that likens the self to steel armoring which needs to be melted with the ‘holy zeal’ of love. By comparing the self to a mail coat of armor, the author is illustrating the rigidity and hardness of heart that is facilitated by an egocentrically-driven mode of existence. By contrast, we find that when the self is melted into pliant wax, it is melted with the fire of love into a material that is pliant, soft, and moldable. Additionally,
in the second quote, we find the self being likened to a prison. The prison of ownership here may refer to an existentially-constricted mode of existence brought about by relating to the world in terms of personal possessions and rigid attachment to what one owns.

In the third and fourth quotes, the reader encounters an admonishment to the spiritual aspirant to “abandon all things that exist” by turning away from the “raging fire” of worldly desire. The metaphorical representation of desire as a “raging fire” finds expression again in the fifth quote, wherein the self itself is described as raging “like an unquenched fire”. The message that is repeatedly being communicated here is that when one’s worldly desires are given free reign, the result is a state of being that is characterized by insatiable desire, pain, and existential constriction. Additionally, the idea that the heart must be free of ownership also refers to the tendency of the alienated and supposedly separate self to understand itself and its relationship to the external world within a narrow framework of possession, control, and dominance. It is precisely because of the narrowness and constriction of this self-centered identification that the illusion of control must be surrendered in order for a more authentic mode of identification and experiencing to emerge.

By contrast, in the sixth quote, an alternative existential possibility is revealed. By comparing the self to a dog that can be trained “to labor for the heart’s delight”, the reader is shown the importance of taming the self and also the fruit of such efforts; namely a psycho-spiritual state of being wherein one is free from the dominance of their desires, and thus able to progress relatively unhindered along the spiritual path. Additionally, this analogy bears a striking thematic resemblance to the Zen oxherding metaphor. In both metaphors, we find the injunction to tame the self that is filled with worldly desire in order to facilitate the emergence of an alternative way of being in the world. In *The Conference of the Birds*, this is
represented by the rulership of the heart or heart-intellect over the self, and in the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” by the taming of the ox, followed by the interiorization of the ox by the herdsman, and the eventual disappearance of both ox and herdsman.

There is also an interesting paradox in both texts with regard to the surrendering of self-will and desire. Although both texts emphasize the importance of surrendering self-will and worldly-desire, the desire to progress along the spiritual path is a necessary component of both texts, albeit one that must also eventually be surrendered. It should be noted here that the will or desire for self-surrender is of a different order than that of worldly desire; the former acts as a centripetal force that moves the individual towards the center of their being, whereas the latter is a centrifugal force that leads the individual away from their original nature and towards dissipation in the world of multiplicity. Another way of putting this is that self-will (defined as agentic action that emanates from selfish or egocentric desire) is not operative when the individual desires to tame or moderate these desires with the sincere intention to progress along a path that leads to self-surrender. Thus, the driving desire behind disciplining the self, provided this desire is not tainted by masochism or egocentric desire, is freedom from suffering and the wish to attain to an abiding state of inner peace, tranquility, and harmony.

In The Ox and His Herdsman, the herdsman “…has resolved to let go of all interests and detach himself from everything” (Otsu, 1969, p.39). In other words, the herdsman has resolved to let go of all interests outside of his search for the ox, and later, the process of taming the ox. Similarly, in The Conference of the Birds, the hoopoe instructs the birds to surrender their attachment to worldly pleasures whilst at the same time strengthening their desire for the Simorgh and their resolve to undertake the journey to him: “They heard the
tale; the birds were all on fire to quit the hindrance of the self; Desire to gain the Simorgh convulsed each heart” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 169).

5. Essential selfhood

Despite the important thematic parallels between the two texts with regard to the importance placed on taming one’s desires and detachment from worldly preoccupation, there are also clear differences that bear mentioning here. One of the key differences between the texts can be seen in the ways that each text conceptualizes and represents the self, particularly in relation to desire. In *The Conference of the Birds*, the notion of self is most often used to refer to the locus of one’s passions and worldly desires. For this reason, the self is juxtaposed with the heart or heart-intellect in a binary fashion. The two are understood to be essentially different. It is in this sense that the hoopoe advises the birds to die to their selves, to escape from the prison of the self, to slay the self, and to tame the ‘dog’ that is the self. The implicit idea here being that when the self no longer dominates the individual, the heart or heart-intellect assumes leadership and is thus able to serve as an inner-guide along the spiritual path.

However, it is also important to note that Sufi discourse understands the heart-intellect to constitute an aspect or faculty that is an intrinsic part of one’s essential or ‘higher’ self. For this reason, one can meaningfully speak of taming the lower self (i.e. one’s egocentrically-oriented sense of separative/dualistic selfhood) in order to render operative the heart-intellect, and thus allowing one’s essential or higher selfhood to emerge. In short, the heart-intellect is an aspect of one’s higher or essential selfhood which can be defined in contrast to the lower self, which represents illusory egoic identity that is socially and culturally constructed. This being said, the distinction between the higher-self and the heart-
intellect is a highly technical one, and for the purposes of this study, it may be more useful for the reader to provisionally interpret the notions of the heart-intellect and the ‘higher’ or essential self as interchangeable concepts.

In contrast, the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” take a different position with regard to what does and does not constitute the essential nature of the herdsman. The ox, who represents the original nature of the herdsman, must be tamed because it has become wild and stubbornly self-willed. In other words, desire itself is understood to be a manifestation and permutation of the original nature. We see this textually when Otsu (1969) writes that: “Even worldly desires and passions, when they are seen into right down to their origin, are that summit, which is the original nature of the self” (Otsu, 1969, p. 73). In this way, it can be argued that the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” present an understanding of the self that is inherently nondualistic, whereas the conception of selfhood articulated in The Conference of the Birds incorporates a provisional degree of duality in order to distinguish between a lower self that operates according to animal instincts and a higher self that operates according to the dictates of the heart.

6. Emptiness/Nothingness

Another common theme found across both texts is the emphasis placed on the experiences of emptiness and nothingness. It is important to point out here that the concept of nothingness is related and yet also different from that of emptiness. On the one hand, emptiness within the Sufi context, refers to the fact that all beings are empty of any substantial or essential ontological reality in and of themselves (i.e. outside of God). In this way, all beings are said to be ontologically dependent on God, who is the unitary source of all existence and the common ontological center that is shared by all beings. In other words, the
Sufi understanding of emptiness posits that all beings are empty of any separate ontological existence outside of God; thus, to be empty of self is to be immersed in the presence of God. Also, to experience the world through the realization of emptiness is to see the presence of God hidden within all beings as well as in the natural world.

It is also to experience events and changes in one’s life as emanating from a single creative source, that of God, thus allowing the individual to experience a sense of serenity and acceptance in daily life. This does not, of course, deny the reality of secondary causes, but rather allows for secondary causes to be seen as the manifestations of a single divine will. On the other hand, although the notion of nothingness also refers to the reality of emptiness, it does so from the experiential vantage point of the supposedly separate self. Thus, the concept of nothingness refers to the supposedly separate self’s terrible fear of emptiness because, from its narrow and constricted point of reference, the reality of emptiness is experienced as a threat to its illusory existence. For this reason, the experience of nothingness implicates the wayfaring birds in a way that is both personal and transformative, as it involves the confrontation of their supposedly separate selves with the truth of their own unreality and emptiness.

Moreover, within the context of these psycho-spiritual texts, the experience of emptiness is partly represented as a stage that must be traversed along the spiritual path. For instance, in *The Ox and His Herdsman*, the notion of emptiness expresses itself most clearly after the herdsman has caught and tamed his ox:

“Returning Home on the Back of the Ox The person is now the person empty of himself and the ox is also empty of himself. The empty person leisurely plays the flute on the back of the empty ox, who walks along peacefully and slowly. Man and ox are coming home, playing the melody of the unborn” (Otsu, 1969, p. 60).

In this excerpt, the notion of emptiness is used to describe the state of the herdsman
after having tamed his ox. Such an individual is said to be empty of himself in the sense of having been emptied of worldly attachment; from his/her preferences for ‘this’ over ‘that’ and from attachment to the ever-changing world of multiplicity, and especially from the exclusive identification with one’s supposedly separate sense of self. Additionally, the ‘empty person’ is able to leisurely play the flute because such a person has surrendered the locus of his/her attachment and desire; the self (i.e. not his/her essential nature but rather their supposedly separate selfhood rooted in ego-centric consciousness). Moreover, it is clear from the above passage that, from the perspective of the text, to be empty of oneself is to be free, at peace, and thus in a state of contentment. By contrast, we can assume that to be full of self is to be strong-willed, rigid, restless, and agitated. Textually, this can be seen even more clearly in the following lines:

“Returning Home on the Back of the Ox Now the struggle is over. Gain and loss have also disappeared into emptiness. The herdsman sings a simple woodsman’s song and plays a country children’s tune on his flute. He rides on the ox and looks up into the blue sky. When someone calls out to him he does not turn round. If tugged by the sleeve he will not stop” (Otsu, 1969, p. 15).

One of the key statements here is that gain and loss have “disappeared into emptiness”. Another way of putting this is that the herdsman has surrendered his attachment to worldly gain and loss, and thus they have, in a sense, disappeared. Additionally, in surrendering his attachment to gain and loss, the herdsman is more broadly surrendering his attachment to the world of duality; that is, to a mode of relating to experience that is based on conceptualizing the world in terms of opposites (i.e., gain/loss, holy/profane, self/other, self/world). Thus, when the herdsman surrenders his limited sense of self qua herdsman, he is able to ‘return home’ to a primordial sense of self (his original nature), and its corresponding way of being-in-the-world.
Another two areas in *The Ox and his Herdsman* that emphasize the theme of emptiness are the seventh and eighth images and associated verses. The seventh sequence is titled “The Ox is forgotten, the Herdsman remains”, and describes the state of being of the herdsman after he has successfully found and internalized his original nature, as represented by the ox (Otsu, 1979, p. 17). At this stage, the ox has disappeared from the experiential world of the herdsman because it is no longer being sought outside of outside himself. The ox appears to disappear because it has been assimilated and interiorized by the herdsman, who previously related to the ox as something that existed outside of himself.

In other words, once the herdsman has interiorized his original nature, there is no longer an ox to be found or tamed. At this stage, by surrendering his attachment to gain and loss, he also surrenders the very obstacle that keeps him from experiencing his original nature, his supposedly separate self. Moreover, in doing so, the herdsman has also returned home to his original nature ‘on the back of his ox’, and he is thus able to discard the provisional pedagogic tool that the ox, as a conceptual category, represents. Textually, we see this in the following verse: “Useless whip and rein, thrown away under the thatched roof” (Otsu, 1979, p. 17). However, it is important to note that the whip and rein (along with the associated conception of the ox) only become useless after the ox has been interiorized. Prior to reaching this stage, the whip and rein, along with the ideal represented by the ox, are indispensable to the herdsman as skillful means by which to arrive at his original nature.

Additionally, the eighth sequence in *The Ox and His Herdsman* contain some of the text’s clearest articulations of the psycho-spiritual significance of emptiness and its relationship to self-surrender. Entitled “The complete oblivion of Ox and Herdsman”, the eighth sequence in describes the herdsman’s experience of realizing his own essential
emptiness:

“Whip and rein, ox and herdsman, have completely vanished without trace. In the vast, blue sky words can never suffice to measure him. How could snow survive in the red flame of the burning fire? Only when a person has succeeded in getting to this place can he match the old masters. Shame! Previously I wanted to save the whole world. What a surprise! There is no longer a world to save. Words cannot express how things are with the herdsman in this realm. Predecessor—successor; here there is neither. Riddle! Who can inherit this truth, who pass it on? With one blow the vast sky suddenly breaks into pieces. Holy, worldly, both vanished without trace. In the unreadable ends the way. The bright moon shines and the wind rustles in front of the temple. All waters of all rivers flow into the great sea”

(Otsu, 1969, p. 19)

In the previous stage, the ox had disappeared but the herdsman remained. But in what sense could it be said that the herdsman remained? One way of interpreting this is that in the seventh stage, the herdsman effectively interiorized his original nature, but traces of his own individual identity, his separate self, remain. By this it is meant that the herdsman still, to some extent, possesses a sense of self that is grounded in an exaggerated identification with himself as an individual that exists apart from the rest of the world. However, in the eighth stage, the whip and rein, along with both the ox and herdsman have vanished. In other words, the herdsman’s experiential sense of separation from both the ox as well as the world itself has disappeared. At this stage, there is no longer any ox to tame and no longer searching herdsman. Both seeker and sought have vanished without trace. This theme of nondual realization will be taken up in greater detail further on in this study.

Moreover, the “complete oblivion of ox and herdsman” signifies the herdsman’s experiential recognition that both his own sense of separate selfhood (i.e. the sense of being a seeker in search of the ox), as well as his conceptual understanding of his original nature as
existing ‘out there’ in the world are both ultimately insubstantial (Otsu, 1969, p. 19). Put differently, it is the recognition that one’s previous dualistic mode of perception mistakenly led one to experience themselves as being essentially separate from the world. Moreover, it is in the herdsman’s recognition of the emptiness of both his separate self as well as the ox that allows the him to experience the fullness and interconnectedness of existence: “The bright moon shines and the wind rustles in front of the temple. All waters of all rivers flow into the great sea” (Otsu, 1969, p. 20). Suddenly, the herdsman becomes present to the shining of the bright moon and, more profoundly, to the oneness of all existence; a sense of unity that pervades all multiplicity. Additionally, in this ‘becoming present’ is also a ‘becoming absent’; the herdsman becomes absent to his previous sense of being a separate self – of being a seeker in search of his ox. Thus, both herdsman and ox are said to vanish into nothingness. This is the complete oblivion of herdsman and ox.

Another way of expressing the relationship between self-surrender and emptiness is through the notion of emptying oneself. This refers the process of emptying one’s mind and heart of attachment to desire and reified notions of separate selfhood. Of course, desire here refers not only to the desire to obtain or possess material objects in the phenomenal world, but also to the subtler desire for independent existence (i.e. the desire for a separate existence), as well as the desire for power, recognition, and permanence. Textually, this can be seen in the following passage:

“The heart becomes empty, the situation quiet and the body just as it is. When someone succeeds in reaching this point the mirror of his heart shines clearly and his nature opens wide and clear. He leaves error and does not attach himself to truth. He dwells neither in error nor awakening. He is neither worldly nor holy. All worldly desires fall away and at the same time the meaning of holiness is emptied without residue. Such detachment from everything is what Master Rinzai called “the complete robbing of both, of man and of Object.” The pupil experiences absolute not-ness, since noumenon and phenomenon, self and
object, allow themselves to come to Nothing. Genuine Zen experience consists exclusively in this robbing of man and object” (Otsu, 1969, p. 75).

The heart becomes empty because it is no longer attached to particular outcomes or to a separate existence. More than this, however, the heart becomes detached from duality itself, and thus the herdsman is able to move beyond all opposites such as worldliness/holiness, and to experience a mode of being that transcends all of these binaries. Additionally, Otsu (1969) points out that at this stage, the mirror of the heart “shines clearly”, and because of this, the individual’s nature “opens wide and clear” (p. 75). There is thus an expansive quality to this emptiness when it is interiorized; one which parallels the expansion that is described in The Conference of the Birds in the following lines:

“When once your hands are empty, then your heart
Must purify itself and move apart
From everything that is- when this is done
The Lord’s light blazes brighter than the sun,
Your heart is bathed in splendor and the quest
Expands a thousandfold within your breast”
(Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 396)

In both texts, experiencing emptiness is a pre-requisite for nondual realization; one which initially requires profound effort, though this effort is itself discarded when the individual is ready to move beyond it. Put differently, it could be said that to realize emptiness is to realize nonduality, because this realization is basically the experiential recognition that all dualities are essentially empty of any separate or positive ontological existence. Furthermore, when we examine the description provided by Otsu (1969) of the herdsman’s inner state upon experiencing emptiness, a profound resemblance to the above passage from The Conference of the Birds becomes apparent:

Otsu: “...the mirror of his heart shines clearly and his nature opens wide and clear” (Otsu, 1969, p. 75).
Otsu: “The pure light sends its rays through the cosmos and in it all beings are one” (Otsu, 1969, p. 91).

Attar: “The Lord’s light blazes brighter than the sun…and the quest expands a thousandfold within your breast” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 396).

We see both texts drawing on a metaphor of illumination and light to describe the result of emptying or surrendering the separate self. In other words, both texts speak to the dawning of illuminated understanding that enters the heart once it has become empty. Additionally, both quotes point to an inner expansion that takes place in the heart after it has become emptied. The paradoxical conclusion of both descriptions is the heart that is emptied of self becomes filled with light, or to borrow a concept from Hanh (2009), the emptied self becomes full of everything in the phenomenal world.

Turning to The Conference of the Birds in greater detail, we find the themes of emptiness and nothingness expressed most clearly towards the end of the bird’s journey to the Simorgh.

The final valley which the birds must pass through on their journey to the Simorgh is the “Valley of Poverty and Nothingness” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 489). In this place, the birds experience an “obscure oblivion” in which their own sense of separateness, of being separate egoic selves, is itself annihilated:

“Next comes that valley words cannot express, The Valley of Poverty and Nothingness: Here you are lame and deaf, the mind has gone; You enter an obscure oblivion. When sunlight penetrates the atmosphere a hundred thousand shadows disappear, and when the sea arises what can save the patterns on the surface of each wave? The two worlds are those patterns, and in vain men tell themselves what passes will remain. Whoever sinks within this sea is blest and in self-loss obtains eternal rest; the heart that would be lost in this wide sea disperses in profound tranquility, and if it should emerge again it knows the secret ways in which the world arose. The pilgrim who has grown wise in the Quest, the sufi who has weathered every test, are lost when they approach this painful place, and other men leave not a single trace” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 489).
It is significant that at this stage the mind is “gone”, as this implies that the mode by which the birds previously experienced themselves as well as the world (i.e. their egocentric self-structure as opposed to their heart or heart-intellect) is no longer operative at this stage. In other words, it is the discursive mind that conceptualizes the world in terms of opposites and difference, and thus this faculty is also responsible for producing the birds’ own sense of being separate and ontologically unique beings. The fact that this faculty becomes inoperative in the “Valley of Poverty and Nothingness”, along with the birds’ sensory faculties (hearing and seeing) is symbolically illustrative of the birds’ need to surrender their old ways of perceiving both themselves and the world in order to arrive at the throne of the Simorgh.

Additionally, the text’s use of the metaphor of sunlight appearing and dispelling ‘a hundred thousand shadows’ is significant here. The shadows may represent the birds’ sense of being separate selves – of being ontologically independent beings. Recall the text’s earlier admonishment: “Thus, we were born; the birds of every land are still his shadows – think, and understand” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p.110). It is most revealing that the light which dispels the birds’ illusory sense of separateness appears at the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness. It is here that the sea of unity begins to rise and in so doing, effaces “…the patterns on the surface of each wave” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 489). The birds’ own sense of being separate selves are the patterns that are submerged in the sea of unity. In other words, the “sea of unity” here represents a nondual mode of perception in which all multiplicity (including one’s own sense of self) are seen to be fleeting manifestations emanating from a unified ocean of being that is itself submerged in God.

Moreover, it is in the Valley of Poverty and Annihilation that the birds experience self-loss and thus enter into a state-of-being that allows for the experience of “eternal rest”
(Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 489). Among the most notable parallels between this text and the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” are the thematic commonalities in terms of the ways that both texts conceptualize, symbolize, and operationalize emptiness and nothingness. Consider, for example, the eighth sequence of The Ox and His Herdsman, entitled “the complete oblivion of ox and herdsman”, where it is said that: “Whip and rein, ox and herdsman, have completely vanished without trace” (Otsu, 1969, p. 19). This experience of disappearing without a trace is also expressed in The Conference of the Birds in strikingly similar language: “The pilgrim who has grown wise in the Quest, the sufi who has weathered every test, are lost when they approach this painful place, and other men leave not a single trace” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 489). Both texts recognize that this psycho-spiritual stage is traceless in multiple senses of the word. The first is that all those who pass through this stage pass without a trace, thus making it impossible for others to effectively describe this spiritual station in language. In other words, when one realizes or attains this stage of emptiness, it is as if they are passing through a portal in which one must surrender the very faculty that would allow for conceptualization. This is the reason why the Valley of Poverty and Nothingness is described as “…that valley words cannot express….” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 488). Similarly, Otsu (1969) tells us that “…words cannot express how things are with the herdsman in this realm” (Otsu, 1969, p. 20).

The other sense in which both texts regard this psycho-spiritual stage to be traceless is in the total disappearance of separate selfhood. Both texts describe an experience of realization in which the self is seen to be essentially empty; the Zen text through reference to the “complete oblivion of herdsman and ox”, and the Sufi text through the notion of self-loss, and through metaphors of annihilation. Another way of putting this is that both texts
emphasize that no trace of duality can be present at this stage. Since the illusion of a supposedly separate self that is driven by egocentric-desires is the epitome of dualistic thinking, it is clear that this mode of perception must necessarily disappear in order for the spiritual wayfarer to progress along their respective way.

Additionally, it is worth reflecting briefly on the notion of nothingness within the context of The Conference of the Birds. The text describes the ‘Valley of Poverty and Annihilation’ as a “place of pain”, perhaps because surrendering one’s sense of separate selfhood may initially feel like a form of death, as if one is giving up all that one is (i.e. one’s identification with desires and a correspondingly narrow and constricted sense of self). From this perspective, surrendering the self may feel like an existential threat and thus may be experienced as painful. However, the text then goes on to point out that this stage (and the pain that may arise with it) is itself an opening into a very different mode of experience.

Consider the following lines:

“A saint once said: “The novice ought to see a door that opens on obscurity – then seas of love will inundate his mind, and he will leave our earthly life behind; If he sees anything but darkness there, he is deceived and worships empty air” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 356).

Once the birds surrender their separate selves and are drowned in the sea of poverty and annihilation, a new mode of experiencing opens up, one that is characterized by love and compassion. One may very well wonder then, why it is that at this station one finds only ‘darkness’, and that, moreover, if one sees anything other than darkness then they are likely in a state of self-deception? One possible answer to this is that when one moves beyond the gates of duality through surrendering their separate selves, any trace of form would imply a clinging to some aspect of the phenomenal world. In other words, to experience anything but emptiness at this stage may imply a lingering attachment to one’s dualistic identity, thus
barring entry to the throne of the Simorgh.

In *The Conference of the Birds*, The Valley of Poverty and Annihilation also represents the final station that must be passed in order for the birds to arrive at the throne of the Simorgh. It is worth dwelling here on the psycho-spiritual significance of poverty and annihilation with regard to self-surrender. The following passage serves as an excellent point of reference for this analysis:

“The passion of annihilation’s night — Your being here is mixed with nothingness, And no joy comes to you without distress; If you cannot endure, how will you find the promised peace that haunts your troubled mind? You leapt like lightning once, yet now you stand like marshy water clogged with desert sand — Renew your courage, put aside your fear and in love’s fire let reason disappear. To be unsure, to pine for liberty, Is to resist our journey’s alchemy. How long will caution make you hesitate? Fly beyond thought before it is too late! To reach that place where true delight is won, accept the dervish path as I have done — I speak of “I”; in truth there is no “I” “Where logic falters and the mind must die. I lose myself within myself; I seek For strength in being poor, despised and weak. When poverty’s bright sun shines over me, a window opens on reality” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 510).

When Attar writes that one’s being is “mixed with nothingness” at this stage, we are reminded of the herdsman’s interiorization of his ox, a similar alchemical process by which one’s mode of experiencing and its corresponding forms of identification are transformed. Additionally, we see again a call for surrendering one’s limited faculty of discursive reason in order create the inner space necessary for a more expansive mode of understanding when the birds are enjoined to “…put aside your fear and in love’s fire let reason disappear” (p. 510). This is also the place “…where logic falters and the mind must die”, and the place where “I lose myself within myself” (p. 510). The former point has been discussed sufficiently, but the later bears elaboration here. When the text describes the Valley of Poverty and Annihilation as being a place where one loses oneself within oneself, it is using paradox to draw attention to the nondual nature of the self, and also to its depth. The self is here described in its psycho-
spiritual wholeness, as an ocean in which the narrow stream of one’s supposedly separate selfhood can flow into and disappear.

Lastly, the emptiness that characterizes this state of being is understood in both texts to transcend all duality. In The Ox and his Herdsman this is illustrated in the eighth sequence, through the “…complete oblivion of both herdsman and ox”, wherein all traces of both disappear. In other words, the dualistic binary of the seeker and the sought (i.e. herdsman and ox), as opposites, are transcended (Otsu, 1969, p. 75). Similarly, in The Conference of the Birds, the dualistic binary of ‘faith’ and ‘blasphemy’ are transcended as the birds surrender their separate selves and realize the mystery implied by emptiness. This can be seen textually in the following lines: “His zeal to know faith’s mysteries will make Him fight with dragons for salvation’s sake –Though blasphemy and curses crowd the gate, until it opens he will calmly wait, and then where is this faith? this blasphemy? Both vanish into strengthless vacancy” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 397). In other words, when the reality of the believing subject has been annihilated, the subject/object binary that characterizes ordinary faith is itself transcended. Similarly, when it is realized that (1) nothing can exist outside of God (i.e. through the recognition of one’s own ontological poverty and (2) that the primary ‘idol’ that one used to ‘worship’, the ego, has been transcended, the ordinary conception of ‘blasphemy’ has also been transcended. In short, the path of self-surrender appears, in both texts, to lead to the door of nondual realization.

7. Nondual Realization

The Conference of the Birds:

A major theme that expresses itself in both The Conference of the Birds as well as in the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” is that of a spiritual quest that culminates in nondual
realization. In *The Conference of the Birds*, this theme is symbolized through the birds’ quest for the Simorgh. Guided by the hoopoe, the birds embark on a perilous journey to reach their king, who represents their essential nature in its nondual wholeness. Textually, we see this in the following line:

“How could they gain the Simorgh?... Our quest is for Truth itself, not just its scent!” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 108). Here, the text tells the story of a search for “truth itself”, a truth which is initially understood by the searching birds to exist in the person of the Simorgh – their king. However, after passing through the seven valleys and arriving at the throne of the Simorgh, the birds find in the presence of the Simorgh their own essential nature mirrored back to them. In other words, the birds initially understood their quest to be for something that existed strictly outside of themselves. However, once they were ready, their guide revealed to them the true nature of their quest:

“Your heart is not a mirror bright and clear if there the Simorgh’s form does not appear; no one can bear His beauty face to face, and for this reason, of His perfect grace, He makes a mirror in our hearts – look there to see Him, search your hearts with anxious care” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 112).

The birds are thus told to look for the Simorgh from within their own hearts. In other words, their dualistic understanding is eventually transmuted through the alchemy of the spiritual quest into an inner search and eventually into an experience nondual realization that dissolves the differences between ‘inner’ and ‘outer’. Additionally, the nondual insight that the birds arrive at towards the end of their journey can be found in the following key passage from the text:

“They rose free of all they’d been before; The past and all its actions were no more. Their life came from that close, insistent sun and in its vivid rays they shone as one. There in the Simorgh’s radiant face they saw Themselves, the Simorgh of the world – with awe They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend They were the Simorgh and the journey’s end. They
see the Simorgh – at themselves they stare, and see a second Simorgh standing there; They look at both and see the two are one, that this is that, that this, the goal is won. They ask (but inwardly; they make no sound) The meaning of these mysteries that confound Their puzzled ignorance – how is it true That ‘we’ is not distinguished here from ‘you’? And silently their shining Lord replies: ‘I am a mirror set before your eyes, and all who come before my splendor see Themselves, their own unique reality...” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 526).

This passage addresses several important aspects of self-surrender. When the text announces that “...their past and all its actions were no more" it seems to be describing the breaking away of an old mode of being in the world; a form of ‘dying to oneself’. In other words, juxtaposed with “...the past and all its actions…” is a new way of being in the world; one in which “Their life came from that close, insistent sun and in its vivid rays they shone as one”. In other words, the birds now experientially understood that the source of their being stems from a unitary ontological source, a “close, insistent sun”, and that they themselves were no more (and no less than) emanations of that single, unified light. Within the context of the Sufi tradition, this unitary ontological source is represented through monotheistic symbolism, as God, though without imputing any essential anthropomorphism to the Divine. Additionally, it is also perhaps significant that earlier in the poem, the text draws on the symbolism of light/darkness to represent the relationship between living beings and the God in a similar and yet different fashion:

“Thus, we were born; the birds of every land are still his shadows – think, and understand. If you had known this secret you would see the link between yourselves and Majesty. Do not reveal this truth, and God forfend that you mistake for God Himself God’s friend. If you become that substance I propound, you are not God, though in God you are drowned; Those lost in Him are ‘not the Deity –This problem can be argued endlessly. You are His shadow, and cannot be moved by thoughts of life or death once this is proved” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 110).

The above passage is among the poem’s most conceptually clear articulations of Sufi
ontology, and brings into focus the tension in the text between dualistic and nondualistic understandings of the relationship between human beings and the Divine. The text also points out that ‘the secret’ which would allow for an understanding of the link between the birds and their Creator is to be found in the metaphor that the birds are ‘shadows’ or reflections of the Divine. What is striking about this passage is that it also straddles the tension of ‘being’ vs ‘becoming’ with regard to the birds’ state of being vis a vis the Divine. In other words, in the first sentence, the birds are told what they are, namely reflections or shadows of the Divine in the world of matter. However, after this, the birds are told that there is a state of being or a ‘substance’ that they might become: “If you become that substance I propound…” (p. 111). The birds are thus simultaneously told what they have always been and what they might become, and it seems that, ultimately, these two modes of being are the same: “…you are not God, though in God you are drowned” (p. 111).

Moreover, the tension between dualistic and nondualistic spirituality within the context of a monotheistic framework are also evidenced here. The birds are at once given conceptual insight into the intimate ontological link between themselves and the Absolute, and at the same time cautioned to not make the grave mistake of identifying the supposedly separate self with the Absolute. The birds are told that they are not God, but ‘God’s friends’ – a most important point to make to the birds while they are still on their journey to Simorgh, and thus – still not free from identification their egoic selves. However, once the birds have ‘arrived’ at their journey’s end, they are existentially ready to experience nondual insight, as expressed by the Simorgh:

“Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far, It is yourselves you see and what you are…With all the dangers that the journey brought, the journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine –You slept secure in Being’s inmost shrine. And since you came as thirty birds, you see these thirty birds when you discover Me, The Simorgh, Truth’s last flawless jewel, the light in
which you will be lost to mortal sight, dispersed to nothingness until once more You find in Me the selves you were before. ‘Then, as they listened to the Simorgh’s words, A trembling dissolution filled the birds –The substance of their being was undone, and they were lost like shade before the sun” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 527).

In telling the birds that the journey was ‘in Me’, and ‘…the deeds were Mine’, the Simorgh effectively negates the implicit duality of the spiritual quest. Even the birds’ prior sense of autonomous agency and individual agency with regard to initiating, undergoing, and accomplishing the spiritual journey is undone when they are told “…the deeds were Mine”. What follows is the dissolution experience of the birds, wherein the final remnants of their previous dualistic mode of being in the world is undone. What follows after the birds are “…dispersed to nothingness…” is no less significant: “…once more you find in Me the selves you were before…” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 527). In other words, after surrendering their individual selfhoods, the birds find within themselves (i.e. reflected through the clarifying mirror that is the Simorgh), a primordial sense of selfhood (their fitra); one which, paradoxically, they already were and always have been.

*The Ox and His Herdsman:*

In *The Ox and His Herdsman*, the herdsman finds himself in a state of inner-incoherence and for this reason embarks on the quest to find his ox, which represents his original nature. During the first stage of the quest, the herdsman believes himself to be seeking something that exists separate from and outside of himself, and for this reason can be said to still be trapped in a mode of dualistic thinking. Textually this can be seen in the following lines:

“Facing outwards only, the herdsman searches with all his might. His feet are already in a deep and muddy swamp but he does not notice” (Otsu, 1969, pp. 39-40).

To face outwards only, in this case, may signify the herdsman’s search for the ox in
the world of multiplicity, or even the search for a material thing that can be acquired and possessed. Unconsciously, perhaps, the herdsman finds himself searching for his original nature without necessarily knowing what he is searching for. What is important to note about the herdsman’s initial search for the ox is that it begins dualistically in that there is initially presumed to be both a seeker (the herdsman) and the sought (the ox). Consequentially, the herdsman’s initial state is one of facing outwards and seeking the ox in the phenomenal world. We see this textually in these lines:

“He is attached to the external and has neglected the place under his own feet. So he looks for the ox; which he can never find, because it is precisely his self, which wants to seek the ox, that is the ox” (Otsu, 1969, p. 41).

The herdsman begins his journey by searching outwardly for his ox. He can never find the ox by searching outside because, as Otsu (1969) explains, the ox represents the herdsman’s essential nature and has thus always been with him; or more accurately, it always and already is him, though he is not aware of this fact. However, despite this impossibility, there is still need for the search, because the herdsman has turned away from himself and is thus in a state of lack and insufficiency which needs to be resolved. In this sense, the Zen Oxherding Pictures can be understood to describe the herdsman’s inner journey from the world of multiplicity to that of unity, although in reality, both multiplicity and unity are two aspects or versions of the same reality. In other words, the herdsman’s journey is, in reality, a perspectival shift from a dualistic mode of perception and being to a nondualistic one. This notion is expressed clearly in the following lines: “We can in a sense say that it is the ox himself who seeks the ox. We, the seekers, are the sought. There are not two here—we and the ox” (Otsu, 1969, p. 41). However, although there are, in fact ‘not two here’, there is still the initial experiential sense of ‘twoness’, of a seeker and a sought, and thus there is a need
for a search that leads from duality to nondual realization. Otsu (1969) makes this point when he writes:

“All beings have the ox contained in them. There is actually no awakening and no error in relation to the ox, in other words to the Buddha nature. He is what each one already originally is. Who could search for him? A search is absolutely unnecessary. But in the words, “Who could search there?” is still the implicit demand that one must indeed search for him” (Otsu, 1969, p. 40).

And so, the search for the ox begins. The herdsman eventually makes contact with the ox by cultivating detachment and turning inwards (i.e. through meditative practices such as Zazen, which cultivate the individual’s ability to perceive the world nondualistically). As the herdsman progresses in his quest, through detachment, discipline, and training, he is eventually able to interiorize his original nature. Once this is accomplished, the ox disappears: “An appropriation occurs there in which the pupil assimilates his own heart, his original nature” (Otsu, 1969, p. 28). As mentioned above, in the seventh sequence, the ox is forgotten through being interiorized. However, the herdsman still remains in the sense of maintaining traces of separate selfhood. And in the eighth sequence, the last traces of duality disappear when both ox and herdsman are forgotten. What remains at this point are the final two stages in the oxherding sequence, and it is these that deal most directly with the theme of nondual realization.

The ninth sequence in The Ox and His Herdsman is titled “The return to the ground and origin”, and begins with the following declaration: “Returned to the ground and origin, the herdsman has completed everything” (Otsu, 1969, p. 21). The ‘ground and origin’ that the text describes is none other than the primordial nature of the herdsman. Having returned to the ground of his being (i.e., his original nature), the herdsman has discarded all traces of separative existence. This means that the artificial boundaries that used to experientially
separate the herdsman from the world have dissolved, leaving in its place the clear recognition that the world of multiplicity springs from the same single source: emptiness. As Otsu (1969) puts it “If you want to know the origin, then penetrate your own original heart. This heart is the source of all beings in the world and outside it” (p. 82). From this we infer that the herdsman, by returning to the ground of his being – his ‘original heart’, or ‘original nature’ - also returns to the source of all multiplicity. From this experiential vantage point, the herdsman is able to perceive the reality that all beings spring out of this ‘original heart’, which is not other than emptiness itself.

The tenth and final sequence in the oxherding pictures is titled “Entering the market with open hands” (Otsu, 1969, p. 23). If the ninth sequence of the oxherding pictures can be said to describe the truth of non-separation (i.e. that the herdsman, the ox, and the world of multiplicity are not separate), then the tenth sequence can be said to describe the truth of differentiation. After the herdsman has returned to his original nature, he must still return to the world of multiplicity to live and also to help others. The herdsman’s return to the marketplace of the world after having experienced nondual realization clearly points to the fact that non-separation does not imply a lack of differentiation. In other words, the experiential recognition that all beings originate from the same unified source does not negate the differentiation inherent in the phenomenal world. At the level of multiplicity, trees are still trees, and people are still individuals. The herdsman returns to the world with open arms in the sense that, having emptied himself of the illusion of separate existence, he embraces the entire world as his self.
8. Love, Compassion, and Service to Others.

The last major theme found in both texts through is that of love, compassion, and service to others. This theme is one of the most important and relevant findings for the purposes of this study, because it provides a clear and practical answer to the question: “why is self-surrender important and what is its ethical relevance to the lived experience of individuals?”. First, it is important to point out that the qualities of compassion and loving service to others are, in many ways, already implicit within the matrix of nondual realization. The realization that one’s selfhood is inherently interconnected with that of all beings, and that one’s self is essentially empty of all forms of dualistic separation (i.e. self and world, self and other), necessarily engenders selfless action towards others. This is because others are no longer seen as truly “other” in an absolute sense, because one has recognized that both oneself and the selfhood of others are empty of any substantial or truly autonomous existence.

This selfless and compassionate service towards others often expresses itself as the wish to free them from suffering. Within the context of The Ox and His Herdsman, we see this expressed textually in the final sequence which is labelled “Entering the marketplace with open hands” (Otsu, 1969, p. 23). Additionally, the notion of self-surrender as compassionate service is even more clearly represented in the translation of the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” by Kapleau (1989/2000), in which this sequence is titled “Entering the marketplace with helping hands” (Kapleau, 1989/2000, p. 381). In this final stage, the herdsman has returned to his original nature through nondual realization, and now returns to the marketplace of the world in order to help others do the same. As Otsu (1969) writes, “He visits the drinking places and fish stalls as he pleases, to awaken the
drunkards there to themselves” (p. 23). In this quote, the drunkards represent ordinary people, the men and women of the marketplace.

The drunkards represent those of us that are lost in the confusion and entanglements of dualistic perception. Moreover, the drunkards are thus named because, being intoxicated, they do not see things clearly. Rather, the drunkard may suffer from double vision, and often sees the world through the distorted lens of their altered state of consciousness. Symbolically, these qualities represent the mode of being of the person caught the entanglements of dualistic perception (i.e. one in which both oneself and others are seen as being essentially separate).

The awakened herdsman returns to the marketplace with open hands in order to awaken others to their original nature. In other words, he/she wishes to free people from the narrow and constricted mode of identification that characterizes the alienated and supposedly separate selves. One might well wonder what it is about this mode of being that causes so much suffering? The answer is that an alienated (and supposedly separate) self lives in a state of fear, because of the narrowness and contractedness of their self-concept. In other words, for the alienated individual, all that is outside of their self (which is identified with one’s egoic identity and corresponding desires) appears to be an existential threat. The external world and all the beings within it are thus seen to be radically outside oneself, and for this reason must be controlled, dominated, and exploited. Additionally, the presumably separate self also suffers from the insatiability of its desires. The alienated self desperately seeks the wholeness nondual communion with the world confers, but is unable to do so, and thus settles for temporary relief through an addiction to pleasure and the pursuit of fleeting desires.
Additionally, the awakened herdsman also returns in a broader sense to living an active and participatory life in their community. However, the propulsive power of this individual’s activity will stem from their original nature, and will thus be selfless through having originated from nondual experience rather than from an alienated experience of separate selfhood. As Otsu (1969) eloquently puts it, “…[he] lives an active life amidst the throng of humanity. This means that he open-heartedly allows the truth of the Buddha to realize itself through his life, in and before the world” (Otsu, 1969, p. 27). What this means is that the awakened herdsman acts with selfless compassion and love towards others without any effort on his part to be “moral” or “good”. Such an individual would not experience giving to others as a form of charity, though his actions would certainly be seen by others as charitable. This is because the awakened herdsman has learned to see himself in others and to recognize others in himself. This is description is, of course, can never be entirely accurate, because in reality, the awakened herdsman has surrendered his supposedly separate selfhood and thus no longer experiences the self-other binary in this way. Nonetheless, such a description is accurate enough in that it describes the open-heartedness and generosity of spirit that characterizes self-surrender.

The theme of love, compassion, and service to others also expresses itself in The Conference of the Birds, albeit more subtly. This can be seen most clearly in the character of the hoopoe, whose role as a spiritual guide to the wayfaring birds is itself an act of mercy, love, and compassion. As mentioned earlier, the hoopoe’s beak is inscribed with the sacred prayer: “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”, and thus symbolizes the selflessness and compassion that guides and motivates his actions.
The hoopoe’s role of spiritual guide to the birds is thus one that is infused with ethical significance. In other words, the hoopoe serves as the manifestation or vehicle for God’s boundless mercy and compassion. Moreover, it is also possible to interpret the hoopoe as symbolizing the original nature or *fitra* of the birds, which is understood in Sufi discourse to be characterized by selflessness, love, and mercy. This is because, for the Sufis, the *fitra* or original nature of human beings is a reflection of the essential qualities of God (mercy and compassion). It is in precisely this sense that the foundational Abrahamic notion that man is made in the image of God (*imago dei*) is understood in this particular context.

Lastly, one question that remains concerns the relationship between nondual insight and the qualities of selflessness, kindness, and compassion. At first glance, there appears to be a contradiction in the fact that the qualities of kindness and compassion, which appear to be anthropomorphic qualities, are here used to describe the experience of non-duality, which, by definition, implies an experiential perspective that transcends anthropomorphism in all its forms; particularly as this relates to metaphysics and ontology. In other words, the question can meaningfully be raised that if kindness and compassion are anthropomorphic qualities, in what sense can they be said to follow necessarily from the experience of non-dual realization, given that this experience is characterized, in part, by the transcendence of dualistic and anthropomorphic conceptualization? From the Zen perspective, it could be argued that kindness and compassion are anthropomorphic descriptions that are themselves discarded alongside all other dualistic conceptions in the experience of non-dual realization. However, kindness and compassion can be said to follow necessarily from the non-dual experience because
the enlightened individual still lives in the world and thus inevitably comes into contact with the suffering of others. Thus, the qualities of kindness and compassion follow necessarily from the non-dual experience, because this experience dissolves the illusion of separation that allows individuals to close themselves off from the suffering of others. Additionally, from the Sufi perspective, the qualities of boundless compassion and mercy are understood to constitute essential aspects of the Divine; thus the manifestation of these qualities in the human plane are seen as reflections of Divine qualities.

The Chapter 6: Discussion

Summary of findings

The primary findings of this study can be summarized as follows: This research identified significant parallels between the Sufi and Zen texts with regard to the ways that self-surrender is conceptualized and lived-out. Both texts share common themes and meaning-structures in terms of the ways that self-surrender is symbolized and imbued with existential significance. The most salient of these are:

i. Lack, Confusion, and Insufficiency as Common Points of Departure
ii. Worldliness and Unrestrained Desire as Common Sources of Error and Hindrance along the Way
iii. Surrendering Self-Will
iv. Taming the Self and Detachment
v. Emptiness/Nothingness
vi. Nondual Realization
vii. Compassion, Love, and Service to Others

Moreover, among the shared thematic elements, notions of emptiness and nondual realization are central towards developing a clearer understanding of self-surrender and its existential significance. Lastly, self-surrender can be understood as a mode of being-in-the-world, one characterized by a nondualistic structure of selfhood as well as by compassion and mercy. The following discussion section will explore in greater detail the implications and broader psycho-
spiritual significance of these findings.

Relevance of Autoethnographic Findings to Thematic Findings:

The first theme to emerge during the hermeneutic process was that of lack and insufficiency; a common point of departure for the protagonists of both texts. Within the context of the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” this expressed itself through the herdsman’s initial state of confusion. The herdsman finds himself lost along entangled paths and from this state of bewilderment he begins to search for his missing ox, which represents his original nature. Similarly, in The Conference of the Birds, the birds find themselves and their society to be lacking justice and harmony, and from this state of insufficiency they resolve to find a king. Upon discovering this theme in the texts, I began to realize its connection to my own life-experience as narrated in the autoethnography section of this study. I, too, began my search for a meaningful and psycho-spiritually oriented way of being-in-the-world as a result of feeling lost and without existential bearings. I, too had found myself caught in paths of entanglement such as that of materialism. But most importantly, I too felt that the “constitution” by which I was living (i.e. my aims, values, and meaning-structures) had, to that point, failed to imbue my life with existential significance and my relationship to the world with meaning. From this common state of lack and insufficiency, I began the search for my missing ox, or, alternatively, for the Simorgh.

Another aspect of my autoethnographic findings that converges with the findings of this study concerns the relationship between self-surrender and agency. The period of life that I wrote about in the autoethnography was one of significant uncertainty and anxiety in my day-to-day experience, and one in which I experienced firsthand the
tension between personal striving and surrender. The first way this expressed itself was through the effort that I put into contemplative practice. I was aware of the importance of my own effort to find peace of mind and heart, and at the same time, there was a growing awareness in me of the insufficiency of these efforts. My personal effort was insufficient in as far as it came from an alienated sense of selfhood, but it was nonetheless necessary because it allowed me to step out of my worldly preoccupations and to open myself to an experience of surrender. In this way, I recognized myself in the oxherding metaphor; particularly at the stage where the herdsman was actively searching for his missing ox. Moreover, when the herdsman catches a trace of the ox, I wondered whether it was really the herdsman who caught the trace of the ox or if, perhaps, it was the ox that presented a glimpse of itself to the herdsman.

The difference between these two interpretations is subtle and yet important. The latter interpretation brings into focus the agentic power of the ox (the original nature of the herdsman), and diminishes the agentic significance of the herdsman (i.e. with the herdsman here understood as one’s identification with an essentially separate identity). Although the Zen tradition emphasizes the notion that, in reality, the ox and the herdsman are two facets of the same reality; this nondual teaching appears to be less emphasized in Sufi teaching stories such as The Conference of the Birds. Instead, the point of emphasis in Sufi discourse centers around the unreality of the separate self vis a vis the unitary reality of the Absolute. However, it is also clear, as The Conference of the Birds illustrates clearly, that once the presumably separate self has been dissolved, the underlying structure of selfhood that remains is profoundly connected to (and not-other than) that of the Absolute.
Hermeneutic Reflexivity: Checking Findings Against Preconceptions

One of the first instances in which I realized that my pre-conceptions were actively coloring my interpretation of the texts was during my first reading of P’u Ming’s Oxherding Verses. The opening lines of the text began with a description of the ox as “a raging ox with menacing horns…” (Pu’Ming & Pine, 2015, p. 1). This description of the ox immediately reminded me that the lower (or egoic) self is often represented in Sufi discourse as a wild animal that needs to be tamed. It also reminded me of The Conference of the Birds, in which the ego is represented as a dragon that must be slayed in order to allow one’s higher-self to emerge. This set of mental associations led me to the mistaken initial presumption that the ox in The Ox and His Herdsman represented the alienated ego, and that the herdsman, in turn, represented one’s original nature that was in search of itself.

This misunderstanding was reflective of my own tendency towards understanding the egoic-self as being essentially separate from one’s original nature. I later would learn that the Zen tradition distinguishes between these two while also affirming that they are not ultimately separate. Moreover, when reading The Ox and His Herdsman, the text itself challenged my pre-conceptions through its description of the herdsman’s initial state of entanglement in worldliness and his subsequent desire to search for his missing ox. In other words, the alterity of the text made itself clear through interrupting the schema that I had unwittingly superimposed on the text. It took me some time to grasp that the ox represented the herdsman’s original nature, and that the ‘wildness’ of the ox and its entanglement in selfish desire did not imply that the ox was essentially ‘other’ or separate from the herdsman’s original nature.
Another major pre-conception I brought to my interpretations of all three texts was the idea that unrestrained and excessive desire (i.e. as expressed through character traits such as greed, avarice, and materialism) serves as the primary obstacle and impediment to the actualization of self-surrender as a mode of being. The findings that emerged through this study have simultaneously confirmed, refined, and subtly challenged this presumption. On the one hand, the findings of this study confirmed my presumption that selfish desire serves as a major obstacle with regard to self-surrender. This is because all three texts emphasize the importance of surrendering selfish desire (i.e. the sweet green grass in *The Ox and His Herdsman*, and the jewelry that weighs down one of the wayfaring birds on its journey in *The Conference of the Birds*).

On the other hand, this study also challenged my preconceptions. In both the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” and *The Conference of the Birds*, a close reading indicates that the pursuit of selfish and unrestrained desire is the behavioral expression of a corresponding mode of identification. In other words, attachment to selfish desire is a behavioral reflection of the psychological state of identification with a narrow and constricted sense of self. This point is important to emphasize despite the fact that it is beyond the scope of this study to determine which of these holds primacy (i.e. whether it is the individual’s actions that bring about and crystallize a narrow and constricted sense of self or whether the individual’s narrow and constricted sense of selfhood itself gives rise to selfish desire).

For example, in *The Ox and His Herdsman*, this dialectic is expressed through the disappearance of the ox (i.e. through the herdsman’s interiorization of the ox), and eventually through the disappearance of both ox and herdsman. This process represents a
shift from a dualistic mode of identification in which the self is understood to exist in radical separation from the world to one in which this duality and its correspondingly constricted mode of identification ultimately dissolves. Additionally, this shift in identification can also be seen in *The Conference of the Birds* through the transformation of the wayfaring birds’ sense of selfhood upon arriving at the throne of the Simorgh. The birds begin their journey in search of a king who presumably exists outside themselves. But what they eventually find is that the kingly presence that they sought exists within their own hearts. As a result, their sense of selfhood is transformed: “There in the Simorgh’s radiant face they saw Themselves, the Simorgh of the world- with awe” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 526). We see then, that there is a shift in both texts from a narrow and constricted sense of selfhood to an expansive and nondualistic experience of selfhood. Moreover, the psychological tendencies and corresponding behavioral expressions of the former are epitomized by selfish greed and fear, whereas those of the latter are represented by a unifying love and corresponding acts of generosity (i.e. the herdsman’s return to the market with open hands and the hoopoe’s acceptance of his role as spiritual guide).

Another preconception that was both refined and deepened by this study’s findings was my pre-understandings of the relationship between self-surrender and individual agency. Prior to beginning the hermeneutic process, I already held the belief that personal agency was, to some extent, required in order to actualize the process of self-surrender. I also believed that personal effort was necessary but not sufficient; an element of grace was needed in order to catalyze and facilitate the dissolution of one’s contracted sense of self and to facilitate the emergence of a nondualistic mode of
selfhood. The results of this study have confirmed these understandings, and they have also refined them. Each of the texts that I worked with furnished textual proof that personal striving is an important aspect of self-surrender.

For example, in *The Ox and His Herdsman*, Otsu (1969) argues that “There is no way for the pupil to break into this sphere other than that of zazen and ceaseless hammering at himself” (Otsu, 1969, p. 32). The sphere that the pupil is seeking to break into is the sphere of nondual perception. To accomplish this, regular and consistent practice is needed (i.e. through the practice of zazen, a Zen contemplative practice that focuses on developing the individual’s insight into the nature of self and world through letting go of conceptual thinking). Additionally, within the context of the Zen oxherding metaphor, this is expressed through the herdsman working relentlessly to tame his ox. Another example can be seen in *The Conference of the Birds* through the birds’ allegorical journey across the seven valleys, each of which requires the birds to overcome various obstacles within themselves (i.e. attachment to their egocentric-selfhood as well as to the world of multiplicity).

However, my pre-understandings were also refined through the hermeneutic process. Specifically, I found that personal striving with regard to self-surrender constitutes an important first step for the protagonists in both texts. It is also a stage along the spiritual journey that must eventually be discarded. This is because the phenomenon of personal striving is only possible within the matrix of a dualistic mode of being (i.e. individual agency is made possible by the implied existence of the individual doer). And given that the journey to self-surrender necessarily begins with the individual caught in the world of duality (otherwise there would be no need for any spiritual quest or personal
effort), personal striving is a necessary stage along this journey. However, once the individual has made sufficient progress along the spiritual path (i.e. once they have succeeded in taming their ox), personal striving is also surrendered through the simultaneous letting go of all separate structures of selfhood and all corresponding identifications, such as that of being a spiritual wayfarer.

Discussion of primary meaning-structures in the texts: Self-Surrender, Emptiness, Nondual Realization, and the Structures of Selfhood:

One of the main conclusions of this research is that a holistic understanding of self-surrender requires a close analysis of the structures of self upon which it is predicated. While engaging with the classical Zen and Sufi texts, it became clear early on that it would not be possible to effectively examine the phenomenon of self-surrender without a clear understanding of each tradition’s respective conceptions of selfhood. For example, in The Conference of the Birds, we find admonitions throughout the text to ‘escape’ the self, to ‘slay’ the self, to ‘control’ the self, and so forth. Moreover, at different points in the text, the self is likened to a fire-breathing dragon, to a dog, and even to metal armor. Suffice it to say that these are negative appraisals of the self, that clearly demonstrate a disparaging attitude toward what the text understands to constitute the supposedly separate self. Speaking through the voice of the hoopoe, the text makes it clear that the wayfaring birds must struggle against their ‘lower’ selves and ultimately surrender it entirely in order to reach the Simorgh. However, we have here an apparent paradox because the Simorgh symbolically represents the ‘deepest self’ of the birds, and for this reason it becomes unclear what the self is and is not.

One way of approaching this problem is by interpreting the text’s implicit understandings of selfhood and corresponding intrapsychic structure within the broader context of Sufi spirituality. From the Sufi perspective, the inner-world of human beings is
commonly conceptualized in terms of an intrapsychic struggle between different psycho-spiritual forces. A common way of conceptualizing these forces is in terms of three states or aspects of selfhood. The first is the ‘commanding self’ (*al-nafs al-ammarah*), which represents the locus of passionate desire in the individual (Nurbakhsh, 1992, p 14). The ‘commanding self’ is also referred to as the ‘self that incites to evil’ because of its being rooted in worldly passions, and is commonly associated with the ego.

The second is the ‘self-reproaching self’ (*al-nafs al-lawwammah*), which represents the individual’s conscience and the capacity to feel constructive guilt when one commits an ethical transgression (Nurbakhsh, 1992, p 14). Thirdly, there is the ‘self at peace’, (*al-nafs al-mutma’in*), which represents a state of psycho-spiritual equilibrium and inner peace. It is also worth noting that the self-reproaching-self and the self-at-peace are often symbolized by the heart’, and in this way are juxtaposed with the ego (i.e. the commanding-self). The underlying idea behind these three aspects of selfhood is that, at any given time, one of them will be operative within the individual. The operative aspect of selfhood will thus be the governing locus from which the individual will experience both himself/herself and the world.

In light of the tripartite structure of selfhood articulated in Sufi discourse, it becomes possible to meaningfully interpret the structures of selfhood in *The Conference of the Birds*. The first and perhaps most important interpretive move that we can make here is to identify the text’s negative descriptions of the self with the ‘commanding self’ in Sufi discourse. In the text, when the hoopoe characterizes the self as a thing which must be destroyed, escaped, or transcended, he is referring to the ‘lower’ aspect of selfhood that is represented by the ‘commanding self’. The spatial metaphor of the ‘lower’ self vs the ‘higher’ self is a useful
heuristic in this case, partly because it is commonly found in the Sufi tradition, and more importantly, because it communicates a binary structure that serves as a point of departure for the spiritual path in this tradition.

The tension between the ‘higher’ the self and the ‘lower’ self is also the point of departure in *The Conference of the Birds*, as exemplified by the birds’ initial realization that their inner constitution makes no sense. The birds realized that their constitution makes no sense because their society lacked ‘justice’, and it lacked justice because there was no king to govern justly. From the Sufi interpretive lens, the beginning of the text points to a state of disequilibrium and conflict within the birds; one which stems from the dominance of the ‘commanding self’ as the governing existential principle that regulates their inner and outer world. As such, when the hoopoe admonishes the birds to destroy, escape, or transcend their selves, it is this aspect of selfhood that is being referred to.

Additionally, the metaphors in the text used to describe the self assume new meaning in light of this interpretation. For example, the self is described as mail armor that must be melted into ‘pliant wax’ with the fire of love. Armor is meant to protect the individual from harm, but if this armor cannot be removed it becomes a type of prison. So too with the ‘commanding self’, the alienated ego, which tries to separate itself from the world out of fear. It is also out of fear that the commanding self tries to arrogate to itself power that it, in fact, does not possess. Thus, when the hoopoe instructs the birds to ‘melt’ the armor of the self, he is, in fact, calling for the birds to surrender the illusion of separateness and autonomy that is the hallmark of the commanding self. Another relevant example which will also lead to the text’s remaining two structures of selfhood can be seen with the hoopoe’s description of the self vis a vis the heart: “But if the heart can rule, then day and night this dog [the self] will
labor for the heart’s delight, and when the heart rides out he sprints away eager to flush his
noble master’s prey. Whoever chains this dog will find that he commands…” (Attar, Davis,

As mentioned earlier in the study, the text’s likening of the self to a dog, particularly
within the context of its trainability and loyalty to its master, serves as an excellent point of
departure for exploring the text’s structures of selfhood. In this analogy, the commanding-self
is depicted as a dog. This dog can either be ‘wild’ or ‘tame’. If the dog is wild, then it obeys
no authority outside its own drives and inclinations. This is the state of the birds prior to
beginning their journey with the hoopoe; it is a state of being in which one’s inner
constitution makes no sense because the dominant aspect of self is the commanding-self,
which operates according to the pleasure principle. It is thus also an unbalanced state of being
because there is a marked absence of a regulatory principle to keep one’s desires and drives
in balance. On the other hand, if the dog is tame, then it will recognize its master’s authority
above its own, and thus find satisfaction in obeying its master’s commands and will
experience negative emotions if it disobeys him/her.

The quality of tameness in dogs symbolically represents an inner-constitution in
which the commanding-self, the ego, has surrendered its authority to the higher aspects of
self. For this reason, if the ‘self-blaming-self’ or the ‘self-at-peace’ are the dominant aspects
of selfhood within the individual (i.e. as represented by the heart), then one’s drives and
desires will be tamed in the sense of being subject to the authority of higher regulatory
principle; one that is capable of governing the individual’s drives according to a principle of
justice and psycho-spiritual equilibrium.

In summary, an interpretive framework based on Sufi discourse provides a
psychologically compelling analysis of self-surrender as a major theme in *The Conference of the Birds*. Through this perspective, it becomes possible to interpret the bird’s journey to the Simorgh as an inner-journey from a state of psycho-spiritual disequilibrium (i.e. one in which the commanding-self is the dominant aspect of self), to one in which the higher aspects of self are gradually able become operative. In other words, *The Conference of the Birds* is a largely an account of the process of self-surrender; wherein the birds learn to surrender their lower selves through the discipline of detachment and the realization of their own inner-emptiness. Moreover, within the Sufi context, the process of forgetting this self is also a process of remembering God. As Schuon (1998) puts it, “The remembrance of God is at the same time a forgetting of oneself; conversely, the ego is a kind of crystallization of forgetfulness of God” (Schuon, 1998, p. 148). The cumulative fruit of the birds’ efforts is nondual realization, as represented by their arrival at the throne of the Simorgh and the subsequent transmutation of their mode of being as it is intermixed with nothingness.

One important question that remains concerns the psycho-spiritual significance of the Simorgh; its relevance to the phenomenon of self-surrender in general, and to the text’s structures of selfhood in particular. Perhaps the best place to begin is by examining the symbolism of the Simorgh within the context of a foundational concept in traditional Sufi thought; that of the individual’s essential nature (*fitra*). The word *fitra* is an Arabic word that approximately translates to primordial nature, essential nature, or original nature, and is usually used to describe the innate or essential wholeness, goodness, purity, and transpersonal intelligence that all human beings are born with. From this perspective, every human being without exception, is endowed by their creator with a wholesome and righteous disposition, a primordial nature that is essentially ‘good’ in that it reflects the essential beauty and goodness
of its creator. As mentioned earlier, the notion of fitra reflects the understanding that man is made ‘in the image of God’.

However, although human beings are born with a wholesome disposition, this perspective holds that, over time, the fitra of the individual becomes covered over with the rust of forgetfulness and unwholesome actions (i.e. actions rooted in greed, excessive desire, selfishness, etc.). Thus, by the time an individual feels the sense of lack, insufficiency, and alienation that prompts them towards a spiritual path, they have already found themselves far along a path of entanglement. Returning to the text, we can now interpret the Simorgh as symbolizing the primordial nature’ or fitra of the birds. This explains why, upon arriving at the throne of the Simorgh, the birds did not find a being separate from themselves but rather their own primordial nature mirrored back to themselves. From this point of view, The Conference of the Birds represents a journey that takes the birds from the shores of duality to the mountain peak of nondual realization.

Turning to the structures of self that are found in the “Zen Oxherding Pictures”, we find a number of parallels to those found in The Conference of the Birds as well significant differences. However, before delving into these similarities and differences and their importance to understanding self-surrender, it will be useful to explore the structures of self that are found in The Ox and His Herdsman in their own right. Firstly, as Otsu (1969) points out, “There is no duality in the Dharma” (Otsu, 1969, p. 17). By this he means that, from the Zen perspective, there is no essential or substantial reality to either the herdsman or the ox. In other words, both are empty of a separate self and thus neither can be said to exist in their own right.

However, despite this basic nondual premise, the herdsman’s experiential reality is
still entangled in the world of duality. Thus, from the lived-perspective of the herdsman, who is still at the beginning of his search for the ox, there very much is a herdsman, an ox, and a quest. This is what Otsu (1969) means when he writes that “In the primordial reality there is nothing to seek but, for all that, the herdsman must continue searching in the direction of the place where there is nothing to search for” (Otsu, 1969, p. 39). In other words, the oxherding metaphor serves the function of what Schuon (2003) identifies as an Upaya: "…the upaya is a 'skillful means' by which Heaven seeks to win souls; since souls are in illusion, the 'means' necessarily takes on something of the illusory, hence the diversity of doctrines, methods and religions..." (Schuon, 2003, p.4). Another way of putting this is that the “Zen Oxherding Pictures”, like The Conference of the Birds, provide instruction to aspirants whose understanding of the journey’s direction and ultimate goal is itself incomplete.

Thus, the intentional actions of the individual along the way operate according to the ‘skillful-means’ of the upaya, which means that it may temporarily draw on the dualistic framework of the individual in order to lead them to nondual realization. This is what Otsu (1969) means when he writes that “Only as a temporary expedient has the ox been portrayed; like a snare in which a hare is trapped, or a weir basket in which a fish is caught” (Otsu, 1969, p.17). This is also the meaning behind the description of the oxherding sequence as “…begin[ning] with the missing of the ox and lead[ing] to the return to the origin…They fit the needs of pupils and their various capacities…” (Otsu, 1969, p.2). There is a herdsman because the pupil has wandered down entangled paths and lost himself/herself in the world of selfish desire and multiplicity. And if there is a herdsman, there also must be an ox, which sets in motion the spiritual quest. However, once the pupil has interiorized their original nature and returned to the source of their being (i.e. their original nature); the upaya of the
herdsman and the ox can be obliviated through an experience of nondual realization in which both herdsman and ox disappear into emptiness.

But what is the nature of this emptiness into which both herdsman and ox vanish without a trace? At this point it will be useful to clarify and explore further the concept of emptiness and its relationship to self-surrender. Throughout the Zen Oxherding Pictures we find references, both explicit and implicit, to emptiness. For example, there are textual references to the vanishing of all traces of the self, to the disappearance of both self and object, and most importantly, to the “…complete oblivion of both herdsman and ox (Otsu, 1969, p.75). These ideas are rendered even most explicit by Otsu (1969), who quotes from the Heart Sutra to explain the ontological significance of emptiness within the context of the Zen tradition: “All beings are emptiness, emptiness is all beings” (p. 56). Before exploring the relationship between emptiness and self-surrender, let us critically examine the notion of emptiness itself.

Perhaps the most well-known teaching around the significance of emptiness in the Buddhist tradition can be found in the Heart Sutra, one of the most well-known teachings on the perfection of wisdom in the Mahāyāna Buddhist Canon, wherein the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara explains the significance of emptiness to one of his students in the following terms:

“Listen, Shariputra, Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form. Form is not other than emptiness, emptiness is not other than form. The same is true with feelings, perceptions, mental formulations, and consciousness” (Hanh, 2009, p.1).

Although it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the metaphysical implications of this teaching, it is nevertheless important to note the ontological primacy of emptiness and its
relationship to form. The Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara explains that form is emptiness and that emptiness is form, and thus points to the interrelationship between them. In other words, form is not other than emptiness, and emptiness is not other than form; they exist as two aspects of a single nondual reality. However, as Hanh (2009), explains, we cannot fully understand or appreciate the significance of emptiness without asking the question: empty of what?’: “Empty means empty of something… ‘Empty’ doesn’t mean anything unless you know ‘empty of what?’… to be empty is to be empty of something” (Hanh, 2009, p. 6). His answer to this question is both simple and profound: to be empty means to be empty of an independent existence, of a ‘separate self’ that can be said to exist outside of an interconnected chain of causality. In other words, emptiness refers to the absence of a separate, autonomous, abiding, and self-sufficient existence. Hanh (2009) explains this through the notion of ‘inter-being’, which itself expresses a foundational principle in Buddhist psychology and cosmology: dependent origination.

The notion of inter-being follows from the principle of dependent origination which holds that all existent ‘things’ (dharmas) exist in a state of dependence on other ‘things’. There is, of course, much more to be said about this concept (i.e. its relationship to the arising of human suffering), but for the purposes of this study, the notion of inter-being suffices to draw out the psychological relevance of dependent-origination and its relationship to both emptiness and self-surrender. According to Hanh (2009), human beings, like all aspects of the phenomenal world, are empty of a ‘separate existence’ that would allow them to exist outside of their relationship to the world.

For example, the existence of the ox depends on the existence of the herdsman, and vice versa – both ‘inter-are’ in the sense of existing only in relationship to each other (and by
being defined by each other). Hanh (2009) also uses the metaphor of the inter-being of the body’s organs, such as between the heart and the lungs, to illustrate the significance of this concept. In other words, the heart is ‘empty’ in the sense of being empty of an existence outside of its relationship to the rest of the body. So too with ‘self’ and ‘other’, which are defined by each other and thus are ‘empty’ of independent existence outside of their relationship to one another. However, it is also important to mention that the notion of emptiness implies more than a lack of independent existence; it also implies a fullness of being through the recognition of one’s interconnectedness with the world. As Hanh (2009) puts it, the notion of emptiness implies fullness because, if emptiness is the ‘ground of being’, then our being is profoundly interwoven with the world which we inhabit.

If we understand emptiness in this way, our understanding of self-surrender becomes more complete as well. Self-surrender implies an experiential process whereby an individual recognizes the essential emptiness of their own being. In The Ox and His Herdsman, we see this expressed in the seventh and eighth sequences; first through the vanishing of the ox (i.e. as a result of being interiorized by the herdsman), and subsequently through the ‘complete oblivion of both ox and herdsman’, whereby the herdsman apperceives the emptiness of both dualities. Furthermore, the herdsman’s recognition of emptiness signifies his recognition that his being is ‘empty’ of a separate existence in that it is neither separate from the ox nor from the phenomenal world.

This is why the herdsman’s experience of nondual realization ends with a description of the natural world: “With one blow the vast sky suddenly breaks into pieces. Holy, worldly, both vanished without trace. In the unreadable ends the way. The bright moon shines and the wind rustles in front of the temple” (Otsu, 1969, p. 20). When the herdsman’s belief in his
own existence as a ‘separate self’ is surrendered, he becomes empty of self, and in this way, full of life. In other words, it is the herdsman’s recognition of his own emptiness that allows him to recognize the ox as his self and thus to interiorize his original nature. It is also this recognition that allows the herdsman to recognize himself in the brightness of the moon and in the rustling wind.

The concept of emptiness is also a major theme in The Conference of the Birds. Drawing on Sufi psychology, we are better able to understand the psycho-spiritual significance of emptiness within the context of the text, and as well as its broader relationship to self-surrender. Two Sufi concepts of particular relevance here are those of fana’a (annihilation of the self), and baq’aa (subsistence of the self in God). Fana’a refers to the second to last stage of psycho-spiritual development within the Sufi spiritual path; it is the stage at which the self (i.e. the ego), and all of its illusions, are once and for all surrendered. The notion of fana’a implies the passing away of the separate self – of the ‘commanding-self’ structure. It is the final form of self-negation or self-naughting before the ultimate affirmation of one’s being in God. Additionally, the notion of baq’aa translates to ‘subsistence’, and it is meant to describe a mode of existence in which one’s being is completely aligned and in harmony with God (Nasr, 2008, pp. 128-129).

In The Conference of the Birds, the concept of fana’a expresses itself most clearly once the birds arrive at the Valley of Poverty and Annihilation. At this stage, the birds’ ‘commanding-self’ structure is surrendered in its entirely. In other words, the birds surrender their dualistic or separate identity, and in so doing surrender their illusory sense of separateness from God. The nondual move in the text can be seen with the fact that, upon arriving at the throne of the Simorgh, the birds find their own essential being mirrored back
to them. Another way of interpreting this is that the birds initially set out to find God outside of themselves. But through the alchemy of the spiritual process (i.e. through the process of emptying and surrendering their lower selves), the birds eventually find God’s presence hidden deep within the very substance of their being; in their essential nature as symbolized by the Simorgh.

Within the Sufi tradition, the culmination of this journey results in the spiritual wayfarer becoming a ‘friend of God’; which symbolically implies a state of nearness to and intimacy with the Divine. It does not, however, imply that an individual ‘is’ God in any sense whatsoever – for this conclusion is absolutely incompatible with the monotheistic foundation of this tradition. Rather, the mystics of this tradition tell us that the individual who exists in the state of self-surrender implied by the notions of fana’a and baq’aa, become ‘drowned in God’ through the realization that nothing exists outside of God. Another way of saying this is that everything that exists, exists ‘in God’ and is thus ‘empty’ of any separate existence, for this reason. Additionally, if we recall a key passage discussed earlier in this study, we find textual evidence of these conclusions:

“Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far, It is yourselves you see and what you are...With all the dangers that the journey brought, the journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine –you slept secure in Being’s inmost shrine. And since you came as thirty birds, you see these thirty birds when you discover Me, The Simorgh, Truth’s last flawless jewel, the light in which you will be lost to mortal sight, dispersed to nothingness until once more You find in Me the selves you were before. ‘Then, as they listened to the Simorgh’s words, A trembling dissolution filled the birds –The substance of their being was undone, and they were lost like shade before the sun’” (Attar, Davis, & Darbandi, 1984, p. 528).

When it is written that “…the journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine – you slept secure in Being’s inmost shrine”, we can draw at least two important conclusions about the nature of self-surrender (p. 528). The first is that self-surrender implies a psycho-spiritual
process by which an individual who initially exists in a state of duality surrenders their separative identity and thus assumes a broader and more expansive sense of self. The second is that although self-surrender, as a lived experience, implies a spiritual path that leads from one state of being to another; when viewed from the ‘mountain peak’ of nonduality, there never was any fundamental reality to one’s separative existence; thus what is surrendered is ultimately a constellation of illusions about the nature of one’s self and its relationship to the world. Moreover, from the mountain peak of nondual understanding, one lives this non-separation both consciously and compassionately in relationship others as well as to the natural world.

For this reason, even when the birds were undergoing their arduous journey, they still “…slept secure in Being’s inmost shrine” (p. 528). Another way of expressing this is that although the birds needed to travel along the spiritual path to arrive at their primordial nature as symbolized through the Simorgh, in reality, their primordial nature (fitra) has been with them from the very beginning. This, of course, does not detract from the fact that awakening to this realization through direct experience makes all the difference with regard to the life of each individual. An unrealized potentiality is, in this sense, of little value to the life-experience of the individual. This conclusion is also found in the “Zen Oxherding Pictures”, wherein the herdsman begins his journey in search of his ox, only to find that his ox has always been with him, and ultimately to realize both the emptiness of both his own identity as well that of the ox.

**Clinical implications of this study:**

This research has a number of clinical implications pertaining to the culturally-competent practice of psychology as well to broadening psychological understandings around
the nature of selfhood. The first concerns the importance of clinicians’ cultural-competence with regard to understanding self-surrender as a psycho-spiritual phenomenon that may reflect the values, existential ideals, and self-understanding of some clients. Self-surrender, as a mode of being, is easily misunderstood and thus pathologized when interpreted from the perspective of modern mainstream psychological theories which often begin and end with the reality of the ego.

For example, ego-psychology, is one lens through which to view oneself and the world, and from this perspective the notion of self-surrender may seem unintelligible at best, and as a form of pathological ego development, at worst. Moreover, the prejudices inherent in mainstream psychological discourse – which is grounded in scientific positivism - may also place some clients at risk of having their existential values and beliefs invalidated and potentially pathologized by well-intentioned clinicians. What makes the phenomenon of self-surrender difficult to grasp is not its inherent unintelligibility or complexity, but rather its ‘otherness’ or alterity relative to the implicit understandings of selfhood that characterize the modern sensibility. In other words, it is often our own unexamined assumptions concerning what is real and what is not that makes the phenomenon of self-surrender difficult to engage with.

This is also compounded by the fact that, in the modern world, individuals are under tremendous pressure to constantly prove themselves, to assert their value, and to distinguish themselves from others. Of course, differentiation is not the problem; as non-separation does not imply non-differentiation. The world of multiplicity is full of differentiation. However, the teachings of emptiness and non-separation that are inherent to the phenomenon of self-surrender explain that beneath these differences, at the level of essence, all multiplicity
originate from the same single source: emptiness. From the Zen perspective, it is emptiness that pervades all of multiplicity, and it is in this realization of the essential emptiness of both self and world that catalyzes the processes of self-surrender. Similarly, from the Sufi perspective, individuals and the world they inhabit, are merely ‘shadows’ or reflections of the real. Thus, self-surrender is conceptualized through the realization of one’s own inner-poverty (i.e. the absence of a separate self), and the broader realization that, because nothing exists outside of the God, everything that appears to exist, only exists in God, the unitary source of all being (Shah, 2011).

Furthermore, the phenomenon of self-surrender is clinically relevant, in large part, due to the fact that self-surrender facilitates health and well-being in a number of ways. Perhaps the most important is that self-surrender allows for individuals to let go of narrow and constricted ways of understanding themselves and others. In other words, self-surrender directly addresses the alienation, anomie, and experiential sense of disconnection that is part and parcel of the supposedly separate self. An example of this might be seen through the experience of an individual who had previously felt no connection to others, learning to care deeply for another person through, in a sense, recognizing themselves in the other person’s experience of joy or pain. Another example can be seen in the transformation of an individual’s relationship to the natural world. An alienated individual who experiences the world through the experiential perspective of the supposedly separate self might experience the natural world as a threat that needs to be controlled, or perhaps as nothing more than a set of resources that can be exploited for personal gain. In contrast, if that person were to surrender their constricted and egocentrically-oriented mode of identification, a new mode of being may arise from within them, one that allows them to experience a sense of communion,
connection, and perhaps even ethical stewardship with and for the natural world.

Another way that self-surrender facilitates health and well-being is through addressing the suffering that stems from addiction. It is important to note here that the term “addiction” is being used to describe a much broader domain of human experience than the formal diagnostic meaning of this term typically connotes. In other words, addiction here refers not only to addictive substance use but also to the less visibly destructive and more mundane range of behaviors that individuals perform, often unconsciously, in order to avoid the feelings of alienation, nothingness, and loneliness, which characterizes the life-experience of the supposedly separate self. This can include, for instance, compulsive use of social media, smartphones, food, and even other people.

Moreover, when an individual is trapped within a narrow and alienated sense of selfhood, it is not uncommon for them to seek relief and temporary escape in the pursuit of selfish desire, such as through excessive consumption. The result of these behaviors when repeated over time is the gradual crystallization of these cycles of addiction into a mode of being that further entrenches the individual into a narrow and alienated experience of selfhood. Additionally, self-surrender addresses addiction through healing the wounds of separation and allowing the individual to open themselves up to a deeper and more expansive ontology; one that, in turn, encourages loving service to others. An example of this can be seen clearly with twelve step programs such as The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (2016):

1. *We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.*
2. *Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.*
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The first step, the admission that one’s life has become unmanageable as a result of addiction, directly parallels the first two themes that were identified in this study through the hermeneutic process: (1) Lack, confusion, and insufficiency as common points of departure, and (2) Worldliness and unrestrained desire as common sources of error and hindrance along the way. Borrowing from the imagery of The Ox and His Herdsman, it could be said that the individual struggling with addiction has found themselves caught along a path of entanglement, and that one of the sources of this entanglement is the addictive cycle of desire that characterizes substance use. Similarly, the realization of the individual in recovery that their life has become unmanageable has a direct parallel in The Conference of the Birds through the birds’ realization that their constitution ‘makes no sense’ and that they are in need of a king to bring order and justice into their lives.

Moreover, the second through seventh steps speak directly to self-surrender through the surrendering of a narrow and alienated ontology and subsequent opening up
to a broader and more expansive one (i.e. the belief in a power that is greater than one’s supposedly separate self). Additionally, the third step is particularly illuminative with regard to self-surrender: “[We] made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him” (“The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous”, 2016). The turning of one’s will and life over to the care of God, as one understands Him, is a direct reference to self-surrender, within a monotheistic context. It is also important to note that the caveat at the end of this statement is of great importance given the diversity of understandings both within spiritual/religious traditions and between them around the symbolic and existential meaning of the word “God”.

Lastly, the twelfth step of this program speaks directly to the theme of love, compassion, and service to others that was identified in this study as constituting a central aspect of self-surrender. The spiritual awakening referred to in the 12 steps is centered around the experience of surrendering of one’s supposedly separate self as well as the addictive behaviors that one had unconsciously sought relief and refuge in. Additionally, the ethical significance of this final stage can be clearly seen in the desire to share one’s experience of awakening with others in order to alleviate their suffering. It is also worth mentioning that final step in this program also has profound ethical implications in terms of the day-to-day life of the individual in recovery, as he/she strives to realize the spiritual and moral principles contained in the twelve steps throughout their lives.

**Self-Surrender as an alternative mode of being-in-the-world:**

Perhaps the most important implication of self-surrender is that it presents a meaningful alternative to contemporary modes of being-in-the-world that are destructive at individual, social, and ecological levels. For instance, self-surrender, as a mode of being,
goes against the grain of the will to power, which knows neither compassion nor satiation. Rather than celebrating and glorifying excessive ambition rooted in the will to power, self-surrender teaches us to recognize our own dependence/interdependence and non-separateness with the world. It also teaches us to recognize our interdependence with other people as well as with the natural world, and all beings within it. In other words, self-surrender instills the realization that one’s own happiness and well-being is dependent on and inseparable from the happiness and well-being of others. The reverse of this is equally true: the suffering of other people is experienced as one’s own suffering, and from this experiential realization comes a profound attunement to the pain of others as well a desire to see them free of suffering.

Additionally, from the vantage point of self-surrender, unrestrained desire is understood as an impediment along the way rather than as the way itself (i.e. within the context of modern consumer culture). As Cushman (1995) points out, the contemporary culture of individualism in the modern world, along with its resultant alienation and anomie, are the result of a particular ‘configuration of the self’; one which is the direct result of historical, economic, and socio-political processes. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to examine these processes, suffice it to mention that they are bound up with a mode of life that is characterized by mass consumption.

Another interpretive lens through which we can examine the value of self-surrender as a liberatory mode-of-being in the world is through Laing’s concept (1960) of social phantasy systems. This concept refers to the socially-constructed nature of reality as a shared domain of experience wherein those in power often impose their phantasy structures onto others. Another way of explaining the social phantasy system is as a nexus that links individuals together through their collective participation in a hallucinated social reality that is made up
of the phantasies of those in power and thus designed to satisfy their desires, often at the expense of those less powerful than themselves (Laing, 1969).

The relevance of Laing to this study is that the notions of ‘phantasy’ and ‘social phantasy systems’ reveal the existential significance of self-surrender through providing a conceptual framework by which to understand its lived-significance in the modern world. Phantasy is a mode of experience characterized by unconscious phantasies that are rooted in human relationships, attraction/aversion to objects of desire, and the interplay of various psychological forces that mediate the individual’s ego functioning, desires, and concurrent experience of reality. Moreover, the concept of phantasy, in contrast to what is connoted by the word ‘fantasy’, speaks directly to the socially-constructed nature of human relationships. While ‘fantasy’ refers to the use of one’s imagination, often in exaggerated or fantastical ways, the notion of phantasy refers to the socio-cultural construction of identity and to the interpellation (i.e. calling into being) of individual subjects through various intersecting discourses of power in society. Laing makes this point when he writes that the “…identification of the self with the phantasy of the person by whom one is seen may contribute decisively to the characteristics of the observing self” (Laing, 1959/1990, p. 117).

In other words, the individual’s identification with the phantasies of powerful others may determine their basic experience and corresponding structure of selfhood.

Additionally, Cushman (1995) points out that, within the context of modern and post-modern Euro-American society, the normative cultural construction or configuration of selfhood is that of the “empty self”, whose defining characteristic is a “…pervasive sense of sense of personal emptiness and [which] is committed to the values of self-liberation through consumption” (Cushman, 1995, p.6). It should be noted here that the use of the word “empty”
to describe the modern and post-modern cultural-construction of selfhood in the modern West is phenomenologically very different from the way it has been used in this study.

The emptiness of the modern and post-modern subject refers to an inner emptiness or sense of alienation that stems from a configuration of selfhood that is premised on the illusion of an autonomous, self-sustaining, and essentially separate self that is inherently disconnected from others. This configuration of selfhood predictably results in societal fragmentation, interpersonal alienation, and, of course, in the private suffering of countless lonely and dissatisfied people. It also may result in mental illness. However, the cultural construction of the supposedly separate self is extremely valuable when viewed strictly from an economic perspective. This is because such a configuration of selfhood traps alienated individuals into an endless cycle of desire and disillusionment through conditioning them to perpetually seek satisfaction through the insatiable pursuit of selfish desire.

However, it is important to note that although this study is referring here to modern and post-modern constructions of the supposedly separate self and its psychological as well as social consequences, there is also a sense in which such a configuration of selfhood has existed, to some extent, in virtually all stratified societies throughout history. While it is beyond the scope of this study to sufficiently unpack this thesis, it will perhaps suffice to point out that, throughout history one of the obvious consequences of the unequal distribution of wealth and power in societies has been the gradual alienation of the elites from the masses. Moreover, it can reasonably be argued that wealth and power in and of themselves have a tendency to lead individuals down paths of entanglement through the temptation to excess that they invite. This hypothesis also serves to explain the fact that teachings on self-surrender have historically arisen in non-Western cultures and in historical periods that
preceded modern capitalism. In this sense, the modern configuration of the separate self can be understood as a mass-produced, popularized, and scientifically-perfected expression of what Fromm (1976) identifies as a “having” mode of being that has existed in stratified societies throughout history.

According to Laing (1969), one of the essential attributes of both individual phantasy as well as social phantasy systems is that those within their orbit are not aware of being so. The inability to perceive one’s own participation in phantasy is even more pronounced within the context of the social phantasy nexus. This is because the social phantasy nexus is shaped by dominant phantasies that serve the interests of those in power, and is thus heavily fortified. This state of being parallels that of the herdsman prior to realizing that he has lost his ox (i.e. before realizing that he is lost along a path of entanglement). It also reflects the state of the birds of the world prior to their realization that their ‘constitution makes no sense’ and that they are in need of a king. What is shared between these examples is a common state of unconsciousness around one’s becoming entangled in a system that leads the individual further astray from their original nature.

Moreover, within the social phantasy nexus, individuals experience themselves through a glass darkly; through the distorted lens of phantasy rooted in desire (both one’s own instinctual desires as well as the internalized desires of others). These phantasies, and the unrestrained desire from which they emerge, are the ‘bushes’ and ‘thorns’ along the ‘path of entanglement’ in the “Zen Oxherding Pictures”. They are also represented by the psycho-spiritual impediments that the birds of the world must overcome within themselves in order to reach the Simorgh. In other words, within the social phantasy nexus, not only are individuals unaware their participation in an ideological structure that interpolates them in pre-
determined ways, they are also unaware of this unconsciousness and are thus profoundly self-estranged.

At this point it becomes pertinent to ask why an individual immersed in a social phantasy might try to escape? Laing (1969) answers this question by arguing that certain segments of society find themselves in an ‘untenable position’. An untenable position is one in which an individual is not able to claim an identity, role, or personality that allows for them to function ‘sanely’ in society. It is characterized by a state of alienation in which one is neither able to remain in the social phantasy nexus nor are they able to leave. In fact, Laing points out that the more untenable a position is, the more challenging it becomes to leave. The untenable position stands in stark contrast to the ordinary state of being for most members of society, which is tenable by virtue of conferring on members a personality and a basic sense of identity that allows them to satisfy basic needs and desires. In short, as Laing points out: for some members of society, “…the phantasy system of the nexus is a lousy hell and they want out” (Laing, 1969, p. 42). Although Laing makes an excellent point in identifying the untenable position that marginalized individuals find themselves in, there seems to be something untenable about the ordinary state of being of those that are well-served by the system as well.

It is important to note here that experiences of self-estrangement, alienation, and anomie are not limited only to the victims of structural oppression. Even those that appear to have everything, in the material sense, may find themselves lost along paths of entanglement that leave them self-estranged, much like the herdsman and the birds of the world. In fact, this point is epitomized in the historico-mythological narrative of Gautama Buddha, who was born into the best of circumstances (i.e. wealth, family, prestige), and yet, because his family
sought to shield him from contact with any forms of suffering, became discontent, self-estranged, and ready to renounce everything in search of self-realization and freedom from suffering.

To summarize, we can reasonably conclude that it is self-estrangement which leads individuals to seek out self-surrender as an alternative mode of being. The social phantasy nexus represents a collectively alienated social structure; one that replicates itself through producing individuals that are themselves alienated and self-estranged. Additionally, this alienation takes the form of a rigid self-structure that experiences itself as essentially separate from the rest of the world. It is a state of being characterized by ‘wildness’, in the sense of being unrestrained in the face of desire (i.e. much like the ox before it is tamed) as well as egocentricity. The resultant psychological symptoms of this state of being are self-estrangement, greed, fear, and avarice (i.e. qualities of human faults that each bird represents in The Conference of the Birds). In contrast, self-surrender represents a nondualistic mode of being-in-the-world that is characterized by a sense of profound non-separation. This sense of non-separation is cultivated through the realization of one’s own essential emptiness (i.e. the emptiness of the supposedly separate self). Following from this, one is able to recognize the fullness of their being through the transformation of identification that is catalyzed by non-dual realization.

Another dimension of Laing’s thinking which is of relevance to this study is his oft-overlooked views on religion and spirituality. The psychospiritual dimension of Laing’s thought can clearly be seen through the work of Burston (2009), whose analysis draws on an interview with Laing that was conducted by George Feuerstein on behalf of The Laughing Man magazine. Speaking from a perspective grounded in Neoplatonic
Christianity, Laing responds to one of Feuerstein's questions regarding the essence of what he has learned in his life with the following words:

“[I have learned] That hope is justifiable. In Christian language, the highest values are faith, hope, and charity or love, and the most important of these is love. However, love can become darkened or disappear, and we may not always be aware of love in our hearts or believe that it exists in the world. How strange it seems that there should be love at all in this world. That love exists at all seems more a bonus than an essential feature of the universe” (Burston, 2009, p.1).

Laing expresses wonderment at the very existence of love in a world that can produce so much suffering, but he also suggests that love constitutes an ontologically essential aspect of existence. One can reasonably speculate here that Laing’s Neoplatonic understanding of love is based on a non-dual perspective which holds that all forms of duality and separation are ultimately empty of any positive ontological existence. In other words, the phenomenon of love implies an absence of ontological separation and expresses itself through the softening of ego-boundaries and ‘loving one’s neighbor as one’s own self’. Moreover, Laing speaks directly to the emptiness of the supposedly separate self during this interview:

“I don't think that such a thing as the ego exists. The ego is a cultural hallucination. The "ego" is a name for a coherent set of mental operations that enable us to function in our society. We draw a circle around those operations and think it is a thing with which to identify ourselves. We must disidentify ourselves from the ego and see it as a process, a systematic, reasonably coherent set of operations. What we call our ego we know to be always changing, impermanent, transient, but still we persist in this hallucination. The transcendental perspective is both immanent and transcendental. So one must simultaneously get into oneself and out of one's ego. It is a return to ordinariness, as in the ox-herding cycle of Japanese Zen Buddhism. A mountain finally becomes a mountain again, a tree a tree, a river a river” (Burston, 2009, p. 5).

When Laing denies the existence of the ego, he is pointing to egoic self’s essential poverty, its lack of any positive ontological existence. The ego is thus recognized as a social construction and as a collective social hallucination. It is also understood to reflect
a futile attempt at putting a static label on an ever changing and impermanent flux of experience. Additionally, the ‘transcendental perspective’ that Laing refers to bears striking resemblances to self-surrender and its corresponding mode of experiencing. This is clear when one considers Laing’s description of getting ‘into oneself and out of one’s ego’, which is another way of representing the process of surrendering the illusion of the separate self and returning to one’s original nature. It is also significant that Laing refers explicitly to the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” to make these points.

Is there a universal structure to self-surrender?

One of the guiding questions that this study has addressed itself to concerns the possibility that there exists a universal structure to self-surrender. In other words, to what extent can self-surrender be regarded as an archetypal human experience (i.e. as a recurring motif or prototypical human experience that can be found in the spiritual discourses of several psycho-spiritual traditions)? And following from this question, what is the existential and ethical value of self-surrender in terms of human well-being? Before reflecting on these questions in light of the present research, it is important to ask a preliminary question: what would it mean if there does exist a universal structure to self-surrender? Firstly, after having examined the phenomenon of self-surrender within the context of Sufi and Buddhist texts, it is even more clear what a universal structure to self-surrender would not imply. It would not mean that self-surrender must follow a particular prescriptive form in order to qualify as an expression of self-surrender. This is because different psycho-spiritual traditions may draw on very different conceptual frameworks and symbols to represent their respective spiritual paths. We see this clearly within the context of Sufism and Zen Buddhism, where the former draws on a symbolic framework rooted in Abrahamic monotheism to inform its
perspective, whereas the latter draws on a Buddhist framework that emphasizes the experiential realization of one’s essential nature through the notion of emptiness.

Nonetheless, the common meaning structures and thematic elements shared between the text do not appear to be coincidental or superficial. Rather, it seems quite clear that their common understandings with regard to self-surrender are profound, and point to areas of conceptual, symbolic, and experiential convergence between these traditions. Moreover, the most significant areas of agreement regarding self-surrender center around the multifaceted experience of ‘surrendering’ a mode of being rooted in (1) duality, (2) the illusion of essential separateness from the world, and (3) unrestrained desire. Additionally, a complementary aspect of self-surrender is the subsequent realization or interiorization of a new mode of being characterized by nondual understanding (i.e. non-separation), and compassionate service to others. Lastly, as an alternative to affirming or denying the possibility of an essential structure to self-surrender, this study invites readers to examine the evidence provided here to arrive at their own conclusions.

**Disambiguating Self-Surrender**

Since this study leaves open the question of whether there exists an essential structure to self-surrender, it is imperative that we conceptually circumscribe the nature of this phenomenon. The notions of ‘surrender’ and ‘self-surrender’ are bound to evoke many different associations for people, each with their own emotional resonances and significance. As such, it will be useful to acknowledge some of the different ways that the notion of self-surrender has been used in order to clarify its particular meaning within the psycho-spiritual context of this study. One way that self-surrender has been interpreted is as a form of surrender to one’s instincts or to the ‘natural world’.
This ‘Dionysian’ interpretation holds that self-surrender constitutes an act of surrender to one’s passionate or ‘irrational impulses’, and that this results in a state of merger or union with the natural world (Statham, 2008). The misunderstanding here is in terms of the inversion of meaning around the notion of surrender. Rather than surrendering one’s separate existence (i.e. the ego) and its associated psychological tendencies (i.e. unrestrained desire, greed, avarice, etc.), a Dionyssian interpretation of self-surrender understands surrender to constitute the surrendering of one’s inhibitions (i.e. one’s ‘superego’, or simply one’s conscience or ethical values). It represents a surrendering of rationality in the name of intoxication. This stands in juxtaposition to Apollonian notions of reason and self-discipline. Although it is beyond the scope of this study to explore these themes in the detail that they deserve, it is relevant to our purposes to make a few remarks around the tension between Dionysian and Apollonian understandings of self-surrender.

If, on the one hand, we interpret Dionysian self-surrender as a form of surrendering to one’s passion; to intoxication in pleasure and sensory stimulation, then conversely, we are likely to interpret Apollonian self-surrender in terms of the dominance of reason over passion (Bryant, 1998). These two perspectives define each other, like high and low or short and tall, and together form a binary that is deceivingly simple. Additionally, this binary way of interpreting the tension between Dionysius and Apollo (i.e. as symbols of irrationality/rationality, passion/self-control) is clearly dualistic and thus not in keeping with the nondualistic understanding of self-surrender identified in this study. In other words, these two perspectives on self-surrender are two aspects of the same coin, and neither, alone, provides an accurate representation of self-surrender in its nondualistic wholeness.

There is an expression in the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism, “neti neti”, which
translates from Sanskrit to mean “neither this, nor that”, and is often used to guide spiritual
aspirants towards a clearer understanding around the nondual nature of reality. This
expression seems appropriate here as well, given that the framework of self-surrender
identified in this study incorporates aspects of both perspectives while conforming to either
of them. The problem with the Dionysian perspective is that it lends itself too easily to
misunderstanding. This perspective seems to resemble the nondual perspective expressed in
the Oxherding Pictures in that it seeks to unite the self-estranged individual with the ‘natural
world’. However, the notion of the ‘natural world’ is similar and yet profoundly different
from the Zen notion of ‘essential/primordial nature’. The former can easily be ideologically
misinterpreted into a philosophy of hedonism which holds that the ‘natural world’ is made up
of one’s basic drives and instincts, and thus self-surrender can be understood as surrendering
to the intoxication of one’s instinctual drives (i.e. sexuality, aggression, etc.).

In contrast, the meaning of ‘primordial nature’ is circumscribed by the Zen tradition,
and implies a certain harmony or balance in the relationship between the individual and the
natural world. This can be seen in the description of the tamed ox provided by Otsu (1969):
“Never does he touch the fodder growing in the fields of others” (Otsu, 1969, p.13). The idea
here is that one’s primordial nature conforms to a harmonious mode of being that is
characterized by simplicity, selflessness, and compassion. This is not because the individual
intentionally tries to be ‘good’ (however this term is understood), for at this stage the
individual is no longer preoccupied with dualistic opposites such as good/evil. Of course, this
is not because these conceptual categories do not have very real existential and ethical
significance at their own level of reality, but rather because the spiritually awakened
individual has realized a mode-of-being that is essentially selfless and thus free of the
egocentric tendencies and delusion that impel individuals to behave heartlessly towards others. In short, a Dionysian understanding of self-surrender can easily be mis/interpreted as a form of hedonic self-surrender to one’s ‘natural’ instincts, and this goes directly against the spirit of self-surrender found in the texts. However, a strictly Apollonian understanding of self-surrender is also significantly lacking. If we understand the symbolic significance Apollo through contrast with Dionysius, we see reason pitted again irrationality – sobriety and self-control versus wine and intoxication. Thus, from the Apollonian perspective, self-surrender can be interpreted in terms of rigorous self-control and the dominance of reason over irrationality. This does appear to capture an aspect of self-surrender, particularly in terms of the earlier stages of the spiritual path (i.e. the process of taming the ox) that call for self-discipline. However, in both *The Ox and His Herdsman* as well as *The Conference of the Birds*, the reader encounters rationality and discursive reason described as being inferior to the innate wisdom of one’s essential nature.

Moreover, once the protagonists in both texts have surrendered their separate selves, the resultant mode of being that emerges is profoundly nondualistic in the sense that there is no longer a supposedly separate self to discipline. Additionally, there is also no longer any need, at this level, for binaries such as right/wrong, because the ego (i.e. separative self) is no longer the operative aspect of the psyche of the individual. Rather, once the individual arrives at a state of self-surrender, they experience themselves and the world through their primordial nature rather than through an egoic subjectivity. However, for the majority of individuals who have not realized this state of being, there is an obvious need to distinguish between good/evil (i.e. as is found within the ethical teachings of virtually all the world’s religious traditions, as well as outside of them).
An example that illustrates the above points can be seen in a passage by Dodds (1951) who explores the notion of self-surrender within the context of its expression in the ritual dances of religious traditions:

“In many societies, perhaps in all societies, there are people for whom, as Mr. Aldous Huxley puts it ‘ritual dance provides a religious experience that seems more satisfying and convincing than any other’.... since according to a Mohammedan sage ‘he that knows the Power of the Dance dwells in God’. But the Power of the Dance is a dangerous power. Like other forms of self-surrender, it is easier to begin than to stop” (Dodds, 1951, pp. 271-272).

Here we have what appears to be a Dionysian expression of self-surrender; it is described as both powerful as well as dangerous. The danger of the ritual dance stems from the fact that it is difficult to stop once one has started – but what does this mean? Perhaps the author means that once one has tasted the ‘wine’ of self-surrender, there is the risk that one will be unable to return to the world of duality and to participate in ordinary life. Such a representation of self-surrender emphasizes the Dionysian element of self-surrender to the exclusion of its Apollonian elements. What is emphasized is the ecstatic sense of communion with the Divine and the dissolution of one’s dualistic self. This is echoed by the example that Dodds gives of the Samaa – the whirling dance of the Sufi dervishes, wherein the separate self is forgotten through the psychosomatic remembrance of the Divine. However, the ‘intoxication’ of the Sufis through the Samaa is always a temporary state; what is called a hal in Arabic (translates to temporary state of being) as opposed to a maq’am (spiritual station). The difference between the two is primarily that the rapture and intensity of the hal is temporary and unpredictable, whereas the maq’am is a stage along the spiritual path that one moves through.

Moreover, the samaa is one practice among many within the orders of the Sufis, and a pre-requisite to this practice is almost always a firm grounding in the ethical, behavioral, and
ordinary ritual practices of Muslim life. In other words, when one practices the *samaa*, or any other form of mystical spiritual practice, in isolation from the broader religious/spiritual tradition in which the practice is situated, there is a risk of psycho-spiritual disequilibrium and incomplete understanding. Additionally, if we accept the idea that an Apollonian understanding of self-surrender over-emphasizes self-control and reason, whereas a Dionysian understanding of self-surrender over emphasizes the ecstatic elements over the need for self-control and discipline then the picture becomes clearer. We see that the phenomenon of self-surrender incorporates elements of both Apollonian as well as Dionysian understandings.

For example, the spiritual path represented in both *The Ox and his Herdsman* and *The Conference of the Birds* begin by emphasizing an Apollonian perspective on self-surrender (i.e. self-control and discipline) and ends with a Dionysian perspective (i.e. mystical communion with the natural world and ecstatic dissolution in the Divine presence). Moreover, there seems to be something structurally essential about this particular sequence; the Apollonian perspective must come before the Dionysian. This is because the ego must be surrendered before one is able to enter and more through the temple of Apollo. This notion is echoed in the Delphic maxim at the entrance of Apollo’s temple: *γνῶθι σεαυτόν* (Know Thyself), which speaks to the need for the individual know their essential self in order to attain essential knowledge of reality.

A similar idea is expressed in the Sufi maxim: ‘He who knows his self knows his Lord’. This can be understood in two ways: the one who is aware of the tendencies of his egoic self knows his lord in the sense of realizing that he has come to be at the mercy and whim of the ego and its desires. The meaning of this is that the person who recognizes which
aspect of his psyche dominates his inner world also discerns the object of his ‘worship’ in the sense of being the primary object of devotion, desire, and attention. For example, if the ‘commanding-self’ or ego is recognized to be the operative/organizing principle in one’s psyche, then this understanding allows one to realize their error in taking the ego (i.e., the supposedly separate self) as an idol. The second way of interpreting this maxim is that, the individual who knows his/her primordial self (fitra) also knows their Lord in the sense that the Divine is present within one’s own heart. In both interpretations, and in line with the Delphic maxim, we see the need for simultaneously realizing the falsity or emptiness of the separate self (the ego) and interiorizing/communing with one’s original nature before one can arrive at mature psycho-spiritual self-surrender.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In the literature review it was pointed out that much of the current research on self-surrender falls under two broad categories: (1) quantitatively-based research that examines the relationship between self-surrender and psychological health, and (2) qualitative research that examines the phenomenon of self-surrender within the context of psychotherapy and clinical practice. The importance of the former is that this research seeks to establish a model of psychological and spiritual well-being that is predicated on self-surrender as a mode of being; one which stands in stark contrast to contemporary understandings of psychological health that over-emphasize individualism and reify the illusion of self-sufficiency.

Additionally, the importance of the latter research can be seen in light of the fact that self-surrender, as a human experience, often plays itself out within the context of the therapeutic relationship (as well as in other contexts such as in the parent/child relationship). For example, as Safran (2016) points out, the tension between autonomy and dependence is a
common element of many, if not most, psychodynamically-oriented clinical work (i.e. within the therapeutic relationship itself as well as within the broader context of the client’s lived-world). Moreover, as Ghent (1990) emphasizes, it is important to distinguish healthy, adaptive, and relationally-mature forms of self-surrender from perversions of this experience such as masochism.

Although the existing research on self-surrender has begun an important dialogue in the field of psychology around the relevance of this phenomenon to both mental health and psychopathology, what has been largely missing from the research is a psychologically nuanced account of self-surrender that explored this phenomenon within its original context of spirituality and religion. The present study sought to address this gap in the literature by drawing on a qualitative research methodology that follows from the nature of the phenomenon of self-surrender. Given the psycho-spiritual significance of self-surrender and the philosophical implications of this phenomenon (i.e. regarding ontology and metaphysics), the methods developed in this study drew on contemplative practice, autoethnography, and textual-hermeneutics to examine the phenomenon of self-surrender within the context of two psycho-spiritual traditions: Zen Buddhism and Sufism.

The major findings of this study centered around seven themes and associated meaning structures shared between the Zen and Sufi texts. These themes, in their totality, provide an outline or common structure through which self-surrender can be conceptualized both in terms of its philosophical and existential significance. Additionally, this study leaves open the question of there being a ‘universal structure’ to self-surrender. It is hoped that by doing so, readers will draw on the present research as well as their own understanding to arrive at an answer. Additionally, one of the most important implications of this study centers
around the existential significance of self-surrender as a mode of being; one which provides a meaningful structure of selfhood that understands itself as primordial and essential rather than fleeting and transitory.

One limitation of this study is that only three psycho-spiritual texts were used for the hermeneutic analysis. Although *The Conference of the Birds* and the two translations of the “Zen Oxherding Pictures” provided an excellent point of departure for exploring the phenomenon of self-surrender within the context of Sufi and Zen traditions, there is undoubtedly more to be learned from these wisdom traditions in other texts. Relatedly, another limitation of this study is that only two psycho-spiritual traditions were drawn on to examine the phenomenon of self-surrender. Given that this study concerns itself with the possibility of a ‘universal structure’ to self-surrender, it is clear that exploring additional psycho-spiritual traditions may have made for a more compelling argument for the universality of self-surrender. Nonetheless, this study’s modest sample size allowed for this research to assume a degree of depth that may not have otherwise been possible. Moreover, although large sample sizes are typically required to establish ‘generalizability’ in quantitative research, the qualitative nature of the present research, together with the psycho-spiritual nature of the phenomenon itself, justifies a more ‘microcosmic’ approach.

This study represents a modest contribution to an area of psychological research that has been both understudied and often misunderstood. As such, there is great need for future research to further examine the psycho-spiritual significance of self-surrender. One possible direction for future research will be to examine the phenomenon of self-surrender from a non-reductionist neuroscientific perspective. The work of McGilchrist (2009) may be particularly useful in this regard. Specifically, McGilchrist’s research into the notion of ‘hemispheric
dominance’ and the differences between the left and right brain hemispheres in terms of the different modes of experiencing that they facilitate may help to situate self-surrender in mainstream psychological discourse. For instance, it could meaningfully be argued that the right hemisphere facilitates a mode of self-perception that allows for the loosening of ego-boundaries, and perhaps even for some, an experience of nonduality. By contrast, the left hemisphere appears to facilitate a mode of self-perception that is inherently dualistic and rigidly egocentric. With this hemisphere’s preoccupation with power and multiplicity, it is deaf, dumb, and blind to the call of the other in all senses of the word.

Another possible area of future research concerns the practical application of research on self-surrender into clinical practice. Given that self-surrender is, primarily, a mode of being-in-the-world, how might psychologists support the psycho-spiritual development of clients in this regard? Relatedly, if self-surrender is conceptualized as a mode of experience, it will be important for researchers and clinicians alike to gain a deeper understanding into this phenomenon in order to assume supportive and non-pathologizing stances in working with clients from psycho-spiritual backgrounds that value self-surrender. Moreover, another question that arises concerns the ways in which psychologists may incorporate this dimension to their work in their role as psychologists, and not, for instance, spiritual teachers or guides. An example of this might be a psychologist working with their client to identify and let go of addictive habits and behaviors that reinforce the illusion of separate selfhood. Future research is needed to skillfully demarcate the role of psychologists that work from a psycho-spiritual perspective, particularly when this work opens out onto self-surrender.

It seems clear to me that we live out our understanding of what it means to have or be a self within the context of our daily lives. These implicit understandings often form the basis
of what we believe to be real (i.e. the commonly presumed reality of ourselves as being essentially separate from the world), and are thus rarely questioned. The psycho-spiritual study of self-surrender is unique in that it offers an interpretive lens that allows for critical inquiry into our basic assumptions around selfhood and ontology. Moreover, self-surrender is not merely ‘deconstructive’ in the sense of challenging the essential reality of our individual identities as ‘separate selves’. Rather, the phenomenon of self-surrender is an invitation to empty ourselves of all that makes us narrow, partial, and divided, and to assume a structure of selfhood that allows for an experience of wholeness and communion.

It is also important to note here that self-surrender does not necessarily imply a linear temporal developmental process for the spiritual wayfarer. Although the texts used in this study can be understood to imply a linear temporal development, in reality, this sequence is not linear but circular, or more accurately, spiraling. The linearity of the herdsman’s psychospiritual development and the wayfaring birds’ journey to the Simorgh represent an ideal; one which the modern spiritual wayfarer may aspire to, but also one which will ultimately express itself differently in each individual’s journey. More importantly, the notion of stages or sequences to psychospiritual development can be misleading in the sense that they can conceal the fact that self-surrender is a life-long process, and that one may need to return to previous stages in order to renew or deepen their understanding as their life, with all its challenges and complexity, continues to unfold. For this reason, a spiraling or circular model of self-surrender perhaps more accurately represents the individual’s progression along the stages of self-surrender alluded to in the texts.

In conclusion, the relevance and timeliness of research on self-surrender is abundantly clear when one looks at the destructive consequences of relating to the natural and social
world from the experiential lens of an alienated and supposedly separate selfhood. By learning to let go of our narrow and ingrained ways of understanding both ourselves and our relationship to the world around us, we develop the capacity for empathy and connection to others. Additionally, in learning to let go of the fear that leads us to draw strict and impermeable ontological lines of separation between our supposedly separate selves and the world, we become more capable of cooperation, togetherness, and, most importantly, of love and genuine self-understanding.

Moreover, by learning to let go of selfish desire and egocentrically-driven actions through contemplative practice, we become re-sensitized to the mystery and majesty of our psychological and spiritual depths. Whether in the serene stillness of solitude or in the clamor of the marketplace, if one looks and listens carefully, traces of the ox will appear alongside the call of the hoopoe. When this happens, we, the herdsmen and wayfaring birds of the world will find ourselves called to surrender all that makes us partial and divided, in order to realize the wholeness and non-separation that has been with us from the beginning. In the timeless words of the *Tao Te Ching*, “If you want to become full, let yourself become empty” (Lao-Tzu & Mitchell, 1994, p. 22).
References


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APPENDIX


Note: Below are select passages from *The Conference of the Birds*. These passages have been selected because they describe the seven valleys that the wayfaring birds must traverse in order to reach the Simorgh. Also included below are the passages which describe the encounter between the birds and the Simorgh.

Description of the Seven Valleys of the Way (pp. 394-395)

*A bird asks how long the journey is, and the hoopoe describes the seven valleys of the Way*

*Another bird said: ‘Hoopoe, you can find
The way from here, but we are almost blind –
The path seems full of terrors and despair.
Dear hoopoe, how much further till we’re there?’
‘Before we reach our goal,’ the hoopoe said,
The journey’s seven valleys lie ahead;
How far this is the world has never learned,
For no one who has gone there has returned –
Impatient bird, who would retrace this trail?
There is no messenger to tell the tale,
And they are lost to our concerns below –
How can men tell you what they do not know?
The first stage is the Valley of the Quest;
Then Love’s wide valley is our second test;
The third is Insight into Mystery,
The fourth Detachment and Serenity –
The fifth is Unity; the sixth is Awe,
A deep Bewilderment unknown before,
The seventh Poverty and Nothingness –
And there you are suspended, motionless,
Till you are drawn – the impulse is not yours –
A drop absorbed in seas that have no shores.*

1. The Valley of the Quest (pp. 395-397)

*When you begin the Valley of the Quest
Misfortunes will deprive you of all rest,
Each moment some new trouble terrifies,
And parrots there are panic-stricken flies.*
There years must vanish while you strive and grieve;
There is the heart of all you will achieve –
Renounce the world, your power and all you own,
And in your heart’s blood journey on alone.
When once your hands are empty, then your heart
Must purify itself and move apart
From everything that is – when this is done,
The Lord’s light blazes brighter than the sun,
Your heart is bathed in splendour and the quest
Expands a thousandfold within your breast.
Though fire flares up across his path, and though
A hundred monsters peer out from its glow,
The pilgrim driven on by his desire
Will like a moth rush gladly on the fire.
When love inspires his heart he begs for wine,
One drop to be vouchsafed him as a sign –
And when he drinks this drop both worlds are gone;
Dry-lipped he founders in oblivion.
His zeal to know faith’s mysteries will make
Him fight with dragons for salvation’s sake –
Though blasphemy and curses crowd the gate,
Until it opens he will calmly wait,
And then where is this faith? this blasphemy?
Both vanish into strengthless vacancy.

2. The Valley of Love (pp. 408-411)

Love’s valley is the next, and here desire
Will plunge the pilgrim into seas of fire,
Until his very being is enflamed
And those whom fire rejects turn back ashamed.
The lover is a man who flares and bums,
Whose face is fevered, who in frenzy yearns,
Who knows no prudence, who will gladly send
A hundred worlds toward their blazing end,
Who knows of neither faith nor blasphemy,
Who has no time for doubt or certainty,
To whom both good and evil are the same,
And who is neither, but a living flame.
But you! Lukewarm in all you say or do,
Backsliding, weak – O, no, this is not you
True lovers give up everything they own
To steal one moment with the Friend alone –
They make no vague, procrastinating vow,
But risk their livelihood and risk it now.
Until their hearts are burnt, how can they flee
From their desire’s incessant misery?
They are the falcon when it flies distressed
In circles, searching for its absent nest –
They are the fish cast up upon the land
That seeks the sea and shudders on the sand.
Love here is fire; its thick smoke clouds the head –
When love has come the intellect has fled;
It cannot tutor love, and all its care
Supplies no remedy for love’s despair.

If you could seek the unseen you would find
Love’s home, which is not reason or the mind,
And love’s intoxication tumbles down
The world’s designs for glory and renown –
If you could penetrate their passing show
And see the world’s wild atoms, you would know
That reason’s eyes will never glimpse one spark
Of shining love to mitigate the dark.
Love leads whoever starts along our Way;
The noblest bow to love and must obey –
But you, unwilling both to love and tread
The pilgrim’s path, you might as well be dead!
The lover chafes, impatient to depart,
And longs to sacrifice his life and heart.

3. The Valley of Insight into Mystery (pp. 427-430)
The next broad valley which the traveler sees
Brings insight into hidden mysteries;
Here every pilgrim takes a different way,
And different spirits different rules obey.
Each soul and body has its level here
And climbs or falls within its proper sphere –
There are so many roads, and each is fit
For that one pilgrim who must follow it.
How could a spider or a tiny ant
Tread the same path as some huge elephant?
Each pilgrim’s progress is commensurate
With his specific qualities and state
(No matter how it strives, what gnat could fly
As swiftly as the winds that scour the sky?).
Our pathways differ – no bird ever knows
The secret route by which another goes.
Our insight comes to us by different signs;
One prays in mosques and one in idols’ shrines –
But when Truth’s sunlight clears the upper air,
Each pilgrim sees that he is welcomed there.
His essence will shine forth; the world that seemed
A furnace will be sweeter than he dreamed.
He will perceive the marrow, not the skin –
The Self will disappear; then, from within
The heart of all he sees, there will ascend
The longed-for face of the immortal Friend.

A hundred thousand secrets will be known
When that unveiled, surpassing face is shown –
A hundred thousand men must faint and fail
Till one shall draw aside the secrets’ veil –
Perfected, of rare courage he must be
To dive through that immense, uncharted sea.
If you discern such hidden truths and feel
Joy flood your life, do not relax your zeal;
Though thirst is quenched, though you are bathed in bliss
Beyond all possible hypothesis,
Though you should reach the throne of God, implore
Him still unceasingly: “Is there yet more?”
Now let the sea of gnosis drown your mind,
Or dust and death are all that you will find.
If you ignore our quest and idly sleep,
You will not glimpse the Friend; rise now and weep.
And if you cannot find His beauty here,
Seek out Truth’s mysteries and persevere!
But shame on you, you fool! Bow down your head;
Accept a donkey’s bridle and be led!

4. The Valley of Detachment (pp. 440-443)

Next comes the Valley of Detachment; here
All claims, all lust for meaning disappear.
A wintry tempest blows with boisterous haste;
It scours the land and lays the valley waste –
The seven planets seem a fading spark,
The seven seas a pool, and heaven’s arc
Is more like dust and death than paradise;
The seven burning hells freeze cold as ice.
More wonderful than this, a tiny ant
Is here far stronger than an elephant;
And, while a raven feeds, a caravan
Of countless souls will perish to a man.
A hundred thousand angels wept when light
Shone out in Adam and dispelled the night;
A hundred thousand drowning creatures died
When Noah’s ark rode out the rising tide;
For Abraham, as many gnats were sent
To humble Nimrod’s vicious government;
As many children perished by the sword
Till Moses’ sight was cleansed before the Lord;
As many walked in willful heresy
When Jesus saw Truth’s hidden mystery

As many souls endured their wretched fate
Before Mohammad rose to heaven’s gate.
Here neither old nor new attempts prevail,
And resolution is of no avail.
If you should see the world consumed in flame,
It is a dream compared to this, a game;
If thousands were to die here, they would be
One drop of dew absorbed within the sea;
A hundred thousand fools would be as one
Brief atom’s shadow in the blazing sun;
If all the stars and heavens came to grief,
They’d be the shedding of one withered leaf;
If all the worlds were swept away to hell,
They’d be a crawling ant trapped down a well;
If earth and heaven were to pass away,
One grain of gravel would have gone astray;

If men and fiends were never seen again,
They’d vanish like a tiny splash of rain;
And should they perish, broken by despair,
Think that some beast has lost a single hair;
If part and whole are wrecked and seen no more,
Think that the earth has lost a single straw;
And if the nine revolving heavens stop,
Think that the sea has lost a single drop.

5. The Valley of Unity (pp. 456-458)

Next comes the Valley of pure Unity,
place of lonely, long austerity,
And all who enter on this waste have found
Their various necks by one tight collar bound –
If you see many here or but a few,
They’re one, however they appear to you.
The many here are merged in one; one form
Involves the multifarious, thick swarm
(This is the oneness of diversity,
Not oneness locked in singularity);
Unit and number here have passed away;
Forget for-ever and Creation’s day –
That day is gone; eternity is gone; 
Let them depart into oblivion.

6. The Valley of Bewilderment (pp. 470-471)

Next comes the Valley of Bewilderment, 
A place of pain and gnawing discontent –
Each second you will sigh, and every breath
Will be a sword to make you long for death;
Blinded by grief, you will not recognize
The days and nights that pass before your eyes.
Blood drips from every hair and writes “Alas”
Beside the highway where the pilgrims pass;
In ice you fry, in fire you freeze – the Way
Is lost, with indecisive steps you stray –
The Unity you knew has gone; your soul
Is scattered and knows nothing of the Whole.
If someone asks: What is your present state;
Is drunkenness or sober sense your fate,
And do you flourish now or fade away?
The pilgrim will confess: I cannot say;
I have no certain knowledge anymore;
I doubt my doubt, doubt itself is unsure;
I love, but who is it for whom I sigh?
Not Moslem, yet not heathen; who am I?
My heart is empty, yet with love is full;
My own love is to me incredible.

7. The Valley of Poverty and Nothingness (pp. 497-490)

Next comes that valley words cannot express,
The Vale of Poverty and Nothingness:
Here you are lame and deaf, the mind has gone;
You enter an obscure oblivion.
When sunlight penetrates the atmosphere
A hundred thousand shadows disappear,
And when the sea arises what can save
The patterns on the surface of each wave?
The two worlds are those patterns, and in vain
Men tell themselves what passes will remain.
Whoever sinks within this sea is blest
And in self-loss obtains eternal rest;
The heart that would be lost in this wide sea
Disperses in profound tranquility,
And if it should emerge again it knows
The secret ways in which the world arose.
The pilgrim who has grown wise in the Quest,
The sufi who has weathered every test,
Are lost when they approach this painful place,
And other men leave not a single trace;
Because all disappear, you might believe
That all are equal (just as you perceive
That twigs and incense offered to a flame
Both turn to powdered ash and look the same).
But though they seem to share a common state,
Their inward essences are separate,
And evil souls sunk in this mighty sea
Retain unchanged their base identity;
But if a pure soul sinks the waves surround
His fading form, in beauty he is drowned—
He is not, yet he is; what could this mean?
It is a state the mind has never seen.

The birds discover the Simorgh (pp. 524-529)

The thirty birds read through the fateful page
And there discovered, stage by detailed stage,
Their lives, their actions, set out one by one—
All that their souls had ever been or done:
And this was bad enough, but as they read
They understood that it was they who’d led
The lovely Joseph into slavery—
Who had deprived him of his liberty
Deep in a well, then ignorantly sold
Their captive to a passing chief for gold.
(Can you not see that at each breath you sell
The Joseph you imprisoned in that well,
That he will be the king to whom you must
Naked and hungry bow down in the dust?)
The chastened spirits of these birds became
Like crumbled powder, and they shrank with shame.
Then, as by shame their spirits were refined
Of all the world’s weight, they began to find
A new life flow towards them from that bright
Celestial and ever-living Light—
Their souls rose free of all they’d been before;
The past and all its actions were no more.
Their life came from that close, insistent sun
And in its vivid rays they shone as one.
There in the Simorgh’s radiant face they saw
Themselves, the Simorgh of the world—with awe
They gazed, and dared at last to comprehend
They were the Simorgh and the journey’s end.
They see the Simorgh – at themselves they stare,
And see a second Simorgh standing there;
They look at both and see the two are one,
That this is that, that this, the goal is won.
They ask (but inwardly; they make no sound)
The meaning of these mysteries that confound
Their puzzled ignorance – how is it true
That ‘we’ is not distinguished here from ‘you’?
And silently their shining Lord replies:
‘I am a mirror set before your eyes,
And all who come before my splendor see
Themselves, their own unique reality;
You came as thirty birds and therefore saw
These selfsame thirty birds, not less nor more;
If you had come as forty, fifty – here
An answering forty, fifty, would appear;
Though you have struggled, wandered, travelled far,
It is yourselves you see and what you are.’
(Who sees the Lord? It is himself each sees;
What ant’s sight could discern the Pleiades?
What anvil could be lifted by an ant?
Or could a fly subdue an elephant?)
How much you thought you knew and saw; but you
Now know that all you trusted was untrue.
Tho

With all the dangers that the journey brought,
The journey was in Me, the deeds were Mine –
You slept secure in Being’s inmost shrine.
And since you came as thirty birds, you see
These thirty birds when you discover Me,
The Simorgh, Truth’s last flawless jewel, the light
In which you will be lost to mortal sight,
Dispersed to nothingness until once more
You find in Me the selves you were before.’
Then, as they listened to the Simorgh’s words,
A trembling dissolution filled the birds –
The substance of their being was undone,
And they were lost like shade before the sun;
Neither the pilgrims nor their guide remained.
The Simorgh ceased to speak, and silence reigned.