CHAPTER 4

Dialogue as Human Existence: Ueda Shizuteru's Zen Buddhist Philosophy and a Care Ethics of Play

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Introduction

Building on the hermeneutic insight that dialogue with others—especially those who hold different views—is essential for self-understanding, this chapter introduces the Zen Buddhist philosophy of dialogue developed by Ueda Shizuteru, a third-generation Kyoto School philosopher, as a new dialogue partner for care ethics. Although very little has been done to

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explore how Kyoto School philosophy might inform care ethics, and vice versa,[1] dialogue remains a central, if underexplored, theme in care ethics. Nel Noddings (2012), for instance, draws on Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship as fundamental to human existence. In discussing the role of caring in education, she quotes Buber (2002: 116): "The relation in education is one of pure dialogue." In *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (1984), she identifies dialogue as one of the three essential means of nurturing the ethical ideal, alongside practice and confirmation. Similarly, Ueda builds on Buber's ideas but develops them through a Zen Buddhist lens, particularly in his analysis of Zen *mondo* (Zen dialogue).

This chapter first examines Ueda's philosophy of dialogue and its implications for the nature of the self. It then explores the Zen Buddhist notion of the "mutual exchange of host and guest," emphasizing its *play-ful* character. To clarify this play-ful quality, I draw on Gadamer's concept of dialogue as a play-process of understanding. Ultimately, I argue that *self-negation* is central to Ueda's Zen Buddhist account of dialogue and conclude with reflections on how this perspective can enrich care ethics.

Ueda on Dialogue and Human Existence

Ueda Shizuteru (1926–2019) is a third-generation thinker in the Kyoto School tradition—a group of philosophers who, in the early twentieth century, developed original ways of thinking. The main focus of Ueda's philosophy was the nature of the self and its relation to reality. Although perhaps more known for his phenomenological-ontological writings on what he calls the "twofold-being-in-the-world," an idea he develops through a critique of Heidegger's being-in-the-world, his writings also include many interesting ideas regarding our being with others. One of the places where he provides an extensive account of what may be called a Zen Buddhist-inspired ethics is in his examination of the nature of dialogue.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition, dialogue, or *mondo*—literally "question and answer"—is central. Ueda (2001: 261) calls Zen *mondo* the "living

[1] A notable exception is Erin McCarthy's book, *Ethics Embodied: Rethinking Selfhood through Continental, Japanese, and Feminist Philosophies* (2010). McCarthy takes Watsuji Tetsurō's ethics based on the embodied, relational self to be in basic agreement with the feminist approach of the ethics of care, both presenting correctives to the traditional Western moral philosophies' overemphasis on rationality, independence and autonomy.

site" (*ikeru genba* 活ける現場) of Zen, where truth emerges through direct exchange rather than static propositions. For example, Ueda (2001: 263) compares the proposition, "one is many, many is one," with a *mondo* between a monk and the Tang dynasty monk, Xuansha Shibei. When the monk asks Xuansha, "What is one?", he responds, "Many," and to the following question, "What is many?", he responds, "One." Ueda says that reducing the dialogue to the proposition, "one is many, many is one" would be tantamount to grabbing a fish in the water and putting it on the chopping board. This is because, he states, "the actual life or the working life of Zen" (*zen no katsugendo* 禅の活現働) is to be found nowhere else but the dialogue itself (Ueda 2001: 264). Therefore, in order to understand Zen *mondo*, we must examine it as a living event as it occurs between two monks.

Based on such initial considerations, Ueda (2001: 272) asks: "What kind of human event is Zen *mondo*? What significance does it have for human existence?" He identifies three essential components of dialogue: (1) facing each other, (2) speaking to each other, and (3) engaging in *mondo* or question-and-answer format. True dialogue requires full engagement, where two people face each other *directly*, both physically and mentally. However, even when one is physically facing the other person, their mental gaze may be disrupted by prejudices they may have of the other or by fixating on maintaining their own self-image. To genuinely encounter the other, we must strip away these barriers and face each other "bare naked" (Ueda 2001: 274).

Once two people establish a direct encounter, then they can begin to speak to each other. For there to be a mutual exchange of words, the interlocutors must both have an interest in the matter at hand and have something to say about it. At the same time, however, dialogue cannot take place if they cannot listen to the other person. In this way, dialogue is as much an exchange of words as it is an exchange of silence. Ueda (2001: 282) thus argues that a dialogue is a free exchange of the roles of speaker and listener.

Although such a portrayal of a dialogue may seem self-evident, Ueda notes that this seemingly self-evident idea is too often not realized in real-life situations. We either speak too much and cannot listen to the other or are merely nodding to the other and cannot speak up. Ueda identifies the failure to freely exchange the roles of speaker and listener as distortions of the original and true way of being human. Before we turn to this point, let

us focus a bit more on what he has to say about dialogue and how it relates to the nature of being human.

We saw above that for a dialogue to take place, the interlocutors must each have something to say about the matter, while also having the openness to hear something new from the other. *But why should we really listen to the other?* "Where does such a demand come from?" (Ueda 2001: 283) Ueda gives two reasons why listening is essential. First, the other person, by virtue of being different, is able to cast light on the blind spots in our perspective. Therefore, while listening to the other person is first and foremost a way to understand the other person, it also entails a decisive pluralization of our own perspective, and hence a broadening of our horizon (Ueda 2001: 283).

But this is not the only reason why we must listen to the other person. We must listen because the other is "a partner" (*aite* 相手) in the self-other relation. The self, according to Ueda, does not exist in isolation but is fundamentally a relational being. That is to say, without the existence of the other to which the self relates, the self cannot exist. Ueda builds on Martin Buber's idea of confirmation, arguing that even rejecting another's opinion requires affirming their humanity (Ueda 2001: 284). As Buber states:

> The true turning of his person to the other includes this confirmation, this acceptance. Of course, such a confirmation does not mean approval; but no matter in what I am against the other, by accepting him as my partner in genuine dialogue I have affirmed him as a person. (Buber 1965: 75)

Thus, true dialogue is not just about exchanging ideas but recognizing the other as a human being. And so, as the two people discuss a common problem, whether explicitly or not, the relationship itself becomes a problem of its own (Ueda 2001: 284). A dialogue is thus said to be more than just a joint search for the problem under discussion but is always, at the same time, "a direct relationship between a human being and a human being" (Ueda 2001: 285). And since human beings are fundamentally relational, Ueda suggests that "dialogue *is* human existence itself" (Ueda 2001: 285, emphasis added). That is to say, human existence is realized through a direct encounter between two human beings in dialogue. This is why, even when there is nothing to discuss, the simple exchange of words can be a means of confirming the human-to-human relationship. Accordingly, in contrast to Heidegger's interpretation of idle talk (*Gerede*)

as an inauthentic mode of discourse, Ueda grants a positive place to small talk. "It's cold today, isn't it?" "I hear it's going to be even colder tomorrow." Such casual exchange about the weather need not be a way of covering up our authentic mode of existence, as Heidegger would have it. For Ueda, exchanging words just for the sake of exchanging words can serve as evidence that human beings are, at their core, dialogical beings. As he says, "When there is some matter (*koto* 事) to be discussed, discussion takes place regarding the matter, but when there is no matter (*buji* or *muji* 無事), then the dialogue itself becomes the matter" (Ueda 2001: 285). That is, when there is no specific topic at hand, the dialogue itself becomes meaningful—not as a means to an end, but as an affirmation of our relational being.

The Exchange of Hosthood and the Nature of the Self

In the above, we have seen that for Ueda, dialogue is not only a method of inquiry but also the very foundation of human existence. Human beings, according to Ueda, are inherently dialogical, and their existence is realized through direct encounters with others. Thus, beyond simply exchanging opinions, dialogue reflects the deep interdependence of self and other, making it essential to the very nature of being human. Before we turn to the third element of dialogue that Ueda identifies, namely the question-and-answer format, let us return to Ueda's previous point that dialogue is the free exchange of the roles of speaker and listener. The discussion here shifts to the nature of the self.

To become the speaker, according to Ueda, is to host the relation with the other, while listening to the other is to make the other the host. Consequently, the exchange of roles in dialogue amounts to an exchange of hosthood (Ueda 2001: 286). At this point, we may ask: If human beings are inherently dialogical, and if dialogue is defined as an exchange of hosthood, then what does this say about the nature of the self?

To begin with, Ueda's emphasis on relationality may suggest that the self is through and through relational. However, while human beings cannot exist without others, Ueda is not saying that the self is entirely defined in terms of its relation to others. As Ueda (2001: 289) writes, "I am I, and, at the same time, I am 'I and Thou.'" That is, on the one hand, as dialogical beings, the self is said to be "the partner's partner," while, on

the other hand, the self enjoys its irreplaceable individuality (Ueda 2001: 289). The self is thus both irreducibly individual *and* fundamentally relational.[2]

Moreover, if we follow the idea that human beings are dialogical and dialogue is an exchange of hosthood, being a host cannot exhaust what it means to be a self. One must also be able to step back, or as Ueda (2001: 286) puts it, "take a distance from our own self" and pass on the role of host to the other. Ueda illustrates this duality of the self by observing the double meaning the word "self" (*jibun* 自分) carries in idiomatic expressions in Japanese. On the one hand, "bringing out the self too much" (*jibun o dashi sugiru* 自分を出しすぎる) suggests excessive self-expression. On the other hand, "having no sense of self" (*jibun o motteinai* 自分を持っていない) implies a lack of self-identity. This tension between self-expression and self-restraint reflects the true nature of the self, which exists in a constant interplay of affirmation and negation.

Building on this last point, Ueda makes the following idiosyncratic statement: "The true self (*shin no jiko* 真の自己) is the unity (*sousoku* 相即) of the freedom from the self and the freedom to the self (自己からの自由と自己への自由)" (Ueda 2001: 286). By "freedom from the self," Ueda is referring to one's capacity to move away from oneself, and hence to let the other be the host, while "freedom to the self" refers to the capacity to establish oneself and take up the role of the host. By saying that the unity of the two is the "true self," Ueda is suggesting that the self is originally the very *movement* of going out, or opening up, and returning to the self, or closing in. This means, first and foremost, that the self, for Ueda, is not an entity-like thing that is self-contained. It is also not defined entirely in terms of being a host or being autonomous. While being autonomous, and being able to say, "I," is an important part of being a self, this aspect cannot be taken apart from the other aspect of going out of oneself.

To go out of oneself is to counteract the self's tendency to cling to the self (holding onto one's self-image, clinging to one's beliefs, etc.), and thereby to negate the self. When this aspect of self-negation is lost, the self gets attached to itself and subsequently gets trapped in its own ego. Ueda sees *self-attachment* (*jiko koshitsu* 自己固執) as one of the existential dangers of the self, and even identifies it as its default state (Ueda 2001: 286,

[2] Nishitani Keiji, a key figure of the second generation of the Kyoto School and Ueda's teacher, has a similar idea regarding the nature of the self. For a rich discussion on Nishitani's I-Thou relation, see: Davis (2017).

2002: 156). At the same time, if the aspect of going out of oneself is separated from its counterpart, namely that of establishing the sense of self, then it may fall into the other danger of *self-loss* (*jiko sōshitsu* 自己喪失). Consequently, self-attachment and self-loss are said to be two dangers of the self. At another place, Ueda (2002: 149) speaks of the self as being "fundamentally at unrest and problematic" precisely because the self is inherently dynamic. The self, therefore, exists in a constant tension between going out and returning to itself, making balance essential.[3] In this way, self-negation and self-affirmation are two inseparable aspects of the self. As Ueda (2001: 286) says: "Sticking to oneself is valid (*shin* 真) insofar as it is a negation of self-loss, while letting go of oneself is valid insofar as it is a negation of self-assertion."

Self-Affirmation and Self-Negation

It is worth taking a moment to clarify what exactly *self-affirmation* and *self-negation* signify here. Self-affirmation, we said, refers to the act of establishing a sense of self. In a dialogue, this involves taking a stand and voicing one's own ideas and feelings. This is certainly an important element in a dialogue since otherwise there can be no exchange of ideas. However, Ueda's key idea is that this form of self-affirmation can lead to self-attachment unless balanced by its countermovement. This may happen when we become overly attached to our own views to the point where we are no longer really listening to what the other is saying. Even when we appear to be listening, we may just be hearing what we want to hear. This is a phenomenon we all too often find ourselves in. The "I," once established, is firm and stubborn. So how can we loosen our grip on the self?

As we saw earlier, self-negation involves letting go of the strong sense of self that stands in the way in the movement of going out of the self toward the other. Noticing that we dominate a conversation and asking for the other's opinion may be a start. But if we remain firmly rooted in our own views, such gestures risk being mere formalities. To truly listen, we must acknowledge the other's otherness and be open to hearing something new. As Ueda, following Buber, emphasizes, we must confirm the other's humanity and encounter them as a fellow human being. This kind of genuine encounter is only possible through self-negation.

[3] For an analysis of the implications of such an account of the self for the concept of harmony, see: Ishihara and Katsunori (forthcoming).

Importantly, self-negation does not require a total rejection of our beliefs. Rather, it can mean taking a step back—or to use the terms of phenomenology, "to bracket" or "put out of play" our assumptions (Husserl 1983: 60–62)[4]—to make room for another perspective. Drawing on the Greek word *ekstasis* (to stand outside oneself), Ueda (2001: 287) describes the other as "the self's ecstatic reality" (*jiko no datsuji no riariti* 自己の脱自のリアリティ). It is only by loosening our attachment to the self and stepping beyond ourselves that we can genuinely encounter the other.

Self-negation is especially important given that we have a strong tendency to become overly attached to our own views. As we saw above, Ueda (2002: 156) identified self-attachment as the default state of the self. But let us recall Ueda's warning that self-negation, too, comes with its own danger. When taken far, it could lead to a loss of one's sense of self. How might this happen in a dialogue? When the topic of a discussion is unfamiliar, and the other person is knowledgeable, one may choose to be quiet and surrender to the seat of the listener. This is appropriate given that it comes from an acknowledgment of and respect for the otherness of the other. However, one may also choose to not speak up from fear of exposing their ignorance. This would be a form of self-loss insofar as their own voice and sense of self is lost. In order to recover their lost sense of self, self-affirmation is necessary. Yet merely speaking up for the sake of speaking up, namely as a way to cover up their lack of knowledge, is insufficient. A genuine form of self-affirmation must start by admitting one's ignorance and actively asking questions with a willingness to learn something new from the other. This would naturally lead to finding their own interest in the topic, and eventually their own voice.

[4] The phenomenological *epoché*, introduced by Husserl, is originally a technical method of suspending judgment on our belief in the existence of the external world. It is coupled with the phenomenological reduction, i.e., turning our gaze back onto the realm of phenomena, i.e. the givenness of things. Although Husserl's *epoché* is a technical method for phenomenologists, at its core it is a way of cultivating an openness toward reality. Building on this point, I have elsewhere (Ishihara and Tainer 2024) suggested reinterpreting the *epoché* as a practical method of loosening our grip on our beliefs to open up to reality, or what we call "play with reality." In Chap. 3, we discuss Gadamer's and Ricoeur's ideas of play in human understanding and their relation to the notion of the practical *epoché* we advance in the book.

Listening, Questioning, and Self-Transformation

This last point about asking questions brings us to the third and final element Ueda identifies in a dialogue: *mondo* or question-and-answer format. Dialogue becomes *mondo* when listening develops into questioning. According to Ueda (2001: 307), questioning occurs at different levels. At a basic level, it signals engagement (e.g., "*I see, so what then?*"). A deeper level involves clarificatory questions, which refine understanding and help the interlocutors articulate their views more clearly. This dialectical process allows both parties to move beyond their horizon and discover new aspects of the self.

For true transformation, however, questioning must become critical. While clarificatory questions remain within expected boundaries, critical questions challenge fundamental assumptions, forcing self-examination (Ueda 2001: 309). Such questions demand the other to reconsider their own foundation, potentially leading to *radical self-negation*—not just setting aside one's views but fully questioning them. While it is easy to critique others, Ueda (2001: 311) stresses that turning this scrutiny inward is far more difficult. What is important, then, is to take the critical questions from others as an opportunity for self-criticism and self-negation. This is not to say that self-criticism is not possible, however. Self-negation can also arise internally when, for example, one reaches an impasse and asks, "What now? How can I proceed?" In such moments, the question, "Who am I?" is thrown over to the other person, and the dialogue takes on the challenging task of a joint search for the lost self.

Through *mondo*, dialogue takes on an "event-like" character (*dekigoto to shite no seikaku* 出来事としての性格) (Ueda 2001: 315). By encountering the other, the self breaks free from its fixed identity, and the interlocutors undergo *mutual self-transformation*. Dialogue, in this sense, is a dynamic, transformative event where new ideas, perspectives, and even a renewed sense of self emerge. This understanding of dialogue as *event-ful* resonates with Gadamer's concept of dialogue and play, which we will explore next. But first, we return to Ueda's original concern: Zen *mondo*.

Zen *Mondo*: Mutual Exchange of Host and Guest

According to Ueda, Zen *mondo* demonstrates the dialogical relation *par excellence* between two human beings. The exchange of hosthood and the dynamic of self-affirmation and self-negation are played out in a radical

and skillful manner in Zen *mondo*. The Zen Buddhist tradition refers to this as the "mutual exchange of host and guest" (*hinju gokan no mondo* 賓主互換の問答) (Ueda 2001: 292).[5] Ueda introduces an example of this exchange from case 68 of the *Blue Cliff Record*:

> Kyōsan Ejaku (仰山慧寂) asked Sanshō Enen (三聖慧然), "What is your name?"
> Sashō said, "Ejaku!"
> "Ejaku!" replied Kyōsan, "that's *my* name."
> "Well then," said Sanshō, "my name is Enen."
> Kyōsan roared with laughter.[6]

The encounter between the two masters begins when Sanshō Enen comes to meet Kyōsan Ejaku. "What is your name?" asks Kyōsan despite already knowing Sanshō's name. Ueda comments that this is tantamount to saying, "I don't know you!" to Sanshō's face (Ueda 2001: 297). In posing this question, Kyōsan asserts his "absolute subjectivity," claiming the role of "host" or "master," as the Chinese character for host (主) also signifies. Importantly, this "host" does not stand relative to the guest but expresses a form of absolute individuality that transcends all relations. Ordinarily, we define our individuality through some universal—I am Japanese, I am a woman, I am a human being. But in doing so, we remain particular instances of a universal, not unique individuals in the absolute sense. To become such an individual, one must negate all such labels. As Ueda (2001: 293) writes, "The one and only absolute individual is established by relinquishing into nothing and reviving from nothing." Through this radical selfhood, Kyōsan subsumes Sanshō into his own world. His question is thus not a mere formality—it is a critical question that threatens Sanshō's very being.

But then, to Kyōsan's surprise, Sanshō replies with Kyōsan's name. Instead of giving his own name and submitting to Kyōsan's sovereignty, thereby being forced to relegate to the role of the "guest" (*hin* 賓), or "servant," Sanshō empties himself and identifies himself with Kyōsan. In doing so, Sanshō is saying, "No, *I* am the host," and subsequently

[5] Nishitani also discusses this dialogue in his essay, "The Human Relationship as 'I and Thou'," originally published in 1961 (Nishitani 1990). For an English translation of the essay, see: Nishitani (2004).

[6] This translation is from Normal Waddell in his translation of Nishitani's text on the I-Thou relation (Nishitani 2004).

subsumes Kyōsan into his own world. Ueda (2001: 298) comments that the first two lines are an unfolding of the scene of the *absolute* (*zet-tai* 絶-対, literally "beyond pairs or oppositions"), where the two masters each claim their absolute subjectivity. Then, when Kyōsan replies, "that's *my* name," he is not surrendering to Sanshō's sovereignty, but rather, he is accepting the invitation and voluntarily becoming the guest. And Sanshō, too, gives his name and becomes the guest as well. Here, we witness the unfolding of the *relative* (*sōtai* 相対) scene, where Kyōsan and Sanshō each step down into the realm of the relative (Ueda 2001: 298). The dialogue thus demonstrates *radical self-affirmation*, where they each demonstrate absolute individuality, and *radical self-negation*, by completely emptying themselves and voluntarily becoming the other's guest. Ueda says that the relation between the two masters in this *mondo* is more than the usual I-Thou relation, where we encounter the other as "a partner" to the "I." Here, the masters are both fundamentally relative *and* absolutely individual. In contrast to an ordinary encounter between "a human being and a human being" (*ningen to ningen* 人間と人間), Ueda (2001: 292) refers to this deeper relation—invoking the classical reading of the Chinese character for person—as one between "*nin* and *nin*" (*nin to nin* 人と人).

It is here that Ueda turns to the notion of play. Referring to Suzuki Daisetsu's notion of the twofold self as "trans-individual and also singular-individual, singular-individual and also trans-individual" (*chōko ni shite koitsu, koitsu ni shite chōko* 超個にして個一、個一にして超個), he writes:

> The Zen question-response dialogue of the mutual exchange of host and guest is *a Spielen between "nin and nin," a great playful activity between true persons who have each awakened to the original self* [*'nin to nin' no spielen (daiyū ni shite yuge)*「人と人」の*Spielen*(大用にして遊戯)]. As singular-individuals they are mutually opposed, and yet as trans-individual singular-individuals they mutually transcend and shed this "oppositionality." As trans-individuals they encompass one another, and yet as singularly individual trans-individuals they cast off this encompassing of one another and "take leave" of the scene. (Ueda 2001: 296, emphasis added)[7]

In speaking of this mutual exchange of host and guest as a "*Spielen*" and a "great playful activity" between "*nin* and *nin*," Ueda is primarily referring to the masters' voluntary and effortless act of mutually exchanging the

[7] This translation is adapted from Davis (2022: 166).

roles of host and guest. In the absolute scene, each master fully exercises their irreplaceable individuality, assuming the role of the absolute host and subsuming the other in their own world. However, this quickly shifts to the relative scene, where they become mutually opposed subjects, each playing their role as the partner's partner.

The transition between the scenes—from absolute to relative, and vice versa—is made possible by the awakened person's "original freedom" (*kongenteki jiyū* 根源的自由). This "freedom" is the heightened form of the "freedom from the self and the freedom to the self" that Ueda discussed before. It is the capacity to speak with one's own voice as the one and only individual (i.e., to play the role of the absolute host), while also knowing when to empty oneself and fully adopt the role of the listener (i.e., to play the role of the guest). Since the ego has been relinquished, listening takes place in its purest form—not from a self-centered perspective, but from a radically other-centered perspective. This capacity to freely switch from absolute individuality to complete receptivity is what makes the dialogue a playful exchange. As Davis (2017: 242) puts it, it is a "playfully competitive as well as compassionate give and take." The competition to maintain their absolute hosthood is a serious matter, but this is done with a "serious playfulness" (Davis 2022: 168). For the truly awakened masters, even this is a role they play. In other words, while they play it, they *are* the absolute individual, but they can also detach themselves from this role and become fully receptive to the other as they play the role of the partner's partner with utmost seriousness.

In this way, the self is able to enjoy a radically direct encounter with the other as well as a complete separation. In Ueda's (2001: 296) words, "It is at once total adherence and complete separation; a play (*yūgi* 遊戯) that is an absolute contradiction and in harmony at the same time. Amid the tension of a direct encounter, they can play (*asobu* 遊ぶ) the 'opposition.' " However, while the seriously playful attitude captures the subjective, experiential dimension of play, Ueda's mention of play in the passages here and above seems to also suggest an ontological dimension. To address this point, let us now turn to Gadamer's idea of the play-process of understanding.

Gadamer on the Play-Process of Understanding

In *Truth and Method* (1960), Hans-Georg Gadamer explores play as central to the ontological structure of art. He seeks to remove its subjective interpretations found in Kant and Schiller, arguing that play is not merely a function of aesthetic judgment but has its own mode of being (Gadamer 2004: 102).

To uncover play's true nature, Gadamer turns to the metaphorical usage of play, as in the play of light, play of waves, play of gears, interplay of limbs, etc. From these metaphors, Gadamer (2004: 104) characterizes play as the "to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end." What is highlighted here is play's dynamic movement. It is irrelevant, says Gadamer, whether there is a subject that plays. The play of colors does not signify one color playing against one another, but rather refers to a single dynamic process exhibiting a variety of changing colors (Gadamer 2004: 104). Even when humans are playing a game, there is an important sense in which humans are not the subjects of the game. The true subject is the game itself that draws the player into its own unique dynamic movement and engages them. In this way, Gadamer (2004: 106) says, "all play is a being-played." Grammatically, the middle voice is said to have primacy: "Thus we say that something is 'playing' (*spielt*) somewhere or at some time, that something is going on (*im Spiele ist*) or that something is happening (*sich abspielt*)" (Gadamer 2004: 104). Accordingly, play is not to be understood in terms of a subject playing an object, but rather an "event" (*Geschehen*) that happens in between players. It is an event in the sense that it is a dynamic process that happens, not within a subject, but in between the players.

Gadamer goes on to apply this understanding of play to the structure of aesthetic experience and, soon after, to all hermeneutic experience. Understanding in general is an "event" that happens in the back and forth movement of past and present, tradition and interpreter, I and Thou. This play-process is nicely captured in Gadamer's characterization of the hermeneutic circle: "[The hermeneutic circle] describes understanding as the interplay (*Ineinanderspiel*) of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter" (Gadamer 2004: 293). It is through this movement between the past and present that our prejudices, or prejudgments (*Vorurteile*), are made transparent and the "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*) takes place.

In her book, *Gadamer's Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other* (2010: 51), Monica Vilhauer argues that this movement of play in understanding is often forgotten because of the strong image of fusion, which is often the focus of critics who accuse Gadamer of being antagonistic to differences amongst viewpoints. "Fusion," according to critics, suggests a merging of viewpoints into one that ultimately does violence to otherness and alterity. According to Vilhauer, if we pay heed to the play-character of the movement, however, then we see that Gadamer's conception of understanding need not be one that "kill difference," but is in fact premised on different viewpoints:

> If we are to grasp Gadamer's unique notion of understanding, then the phrase "fusion of horizons" that he uses to describe this understanding must be considered in terms of the larger play-process of which it is a part. It must be understood in terms of the dynamic, ongoing "sharing" of a common game—that game of developing a joint articulation of truth—in which we find an *interplay* of traditionary meaning and a contemporary interpreter, or an *interplay* of past and present horizons. (Vilhauer 2010: 63, emphasis in original)

Insofar as understanding is an "interplay" of past and present, as well as I and Thou, difference is the "lifeblood" (2010: xiii) of understanding. This is because the movement of play cannot take place without another person or thing that responds to it. As Gadamer says:

> The movement to-and-fro obviously belongs so essentially to the game that there is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself. In order for there to be a game, there always has to be, not necessarily literally another player, but something else with which the player plays and which automatically responds to his move with a countermove. (Gadamer 2004: 106)

Thus, in employing the notion of play, Gadamer is first and foremost claiming that understanding is "never a subjective relation to a given 'object'" (2004: xxviii), but a dynamic movement that takes place in between. Additionally, the otherness of the other must be preserved since the movement of play is premised on some sort of difference. Another point that Gadamer is emphasizing with the notion of play is what Vilhauer

(2010: 29) calls the "ethics of engagement."[8] In contrast to the "ethics of disengagement" in the natural sciences, where the emphasis is put on removing oneself and all subjective attributes from the investigation in order to attain objective knowledge, Gadamer's notion of the play movement of understanding calls for an engaged participation with others in a joint pursuit for truth. To be engaged in play is to take part in something larger than oneself, and hence engagement entails what Gadamer (2004: 105) calls, "the primacy of play over the consciousness of the players."

Engagement and Detachment

Gadamer's conception of play helps us better understand what is at stake in Ueda's allusion to play. As we saw earlier, Ueda refers to the mutual exchange of host and guest as a "*Spielen*" and a "great playful activity" between "*nin* and *nin*." While this can be understood subjectively in terms of the masters' playfulness, such a reading does not fully capture the *play-ful* character of the mutual exchange. As with Gadamer, what is highlighted here is the dynamic movement of play itself. As such, the mutual exchange of the host and guest *is* the dynamic movement of play, and the playful attitude of the masters is an expression of this movement. Accordingly, for Ueda, too, understanding the other in dialogue is not a subjective relation to an object, but an *event* that takes place in between I and Thou.

With this notion of *event*, both Gadamer and Ueda are emphasizing the dynamic nature of dialogue. But as we saw earlier, Ueda is also saying that dialogue is *event-ful* because it is a place where new things happen. New ideas, new perspectives, and even a new sense of self can emerge through dialogue. Moreover, this is only possible when one truly appreciates the otherness of the other by passing over the role of the host to the other and listening attentively as any good guest would do. Through listening, we not only learn about the other, but we also learn about ourselves through the other. This is because the other, by virtue of being different, is able to cast light on our blind spots. And when listening further develops into a critical form of questioning, it can move us to reconsider our basic standpoints and potentially lead to self-transformation. Accordingly, just as Gadamer's play of understanding was premised on the difference between

[8] Vilhauer (2010: 29) notes that this phrase is commonly used by Charles Taylor in his lectures on what he calls "mediational epistemology."

I and Thou, the play of the mutual exchange of host and guest can also be said to be premised on difference, and specifically, on the difference in *roles*. The dialogue cannot take place between two hosts or two guests. In the former, the interlocutors would merely be speaking across each other, while in the latter, there would just be silence. But genuine dialogue is also not unidirectional but *bidirectional*. As we saw in the Zen *mondo*, the roles of host and guest are freely exchanged, and this was due to the "original freedom" the awakened masters enjoy. It is the freedom to play the role of the host and claim absolute individuality, and, at another time, to play the role of the guest and become fully receptive to the other.

A key distinction between Gadamer and Ueda lies in their emphasis on engagement versus detachment. Gadamer sees play as immersive—a submission to something beyond oneself. In a game, players are played by the game, mirroring his rejection of the "ethics of disengagement" found in the natural sciences. Understanding, for Gadamer, requires active participation, i.e., one must be drawn into the movement of play. Ueda agrees that engagement is crucial for genuine dialogue, but he emphasizes an equally important counterpart: *detachment*. This is not the same as the "disengagement" of the natural sciences where we leave the self out of consideration, but it is a detachment from the self's tendency to cling to itself and its own views. Indeed, true engagement in dialogue is premised on self-negation or detachment since one cannot truly become the guest unless one gives up the seat of the host. Thus, while Gadamer stresses immersion, Ueda argues that detachment is the necessary precondition for genuine engagement.[9] Again, this is not to say that Ueda denies the importance of engagement. Ueda's point is that while important, it is also very difficult to do in real life because self-attachment is a real, serious issue. Only when one succeeds in removing oneself from the seat of the host and let the other be the host can the play of the mutual exchange of host and guest truly unfold.

[9] Gadamer (2004: 122) does speak of "being outside oneself" (*Außersichsein*) as the "positive possibility of being wholly with something else." He also speaks of an "ekstatic self-forgetfulness" that makes possible the "genuine and comprehensive participation in what is being presented before us" (2004: 124). However, Gadamer does not put emphasis on making detachment from oneself one's task. This would surely require much effort, which goes against "the ease of play" that Gadamer underlines (2004: 105). For Gadamer, "being outside oneself" seems to merely follow from being absorbed in play.

Toward a Care Ethics of Play

While the discussion above focused on Ueda's Zen Buddhist philosophy of dialogue and its connection to Gadamer's play-process of understanding, it also aligns with care ethics in significant ways. Ueda's emphasis on relationality parallels care ethicists' view that relationships are ontologically and morally fundamental. Both perspectives highlight listening and the importance of receptivity, akin to Noddings' ideas of engrossment and motivational displacement (Noddings 1984). Indeed, what Noddings says of engrossment, borrowing Buber's words, would qualify as an accurate description of what it means to take up the role of the guest and let the other be the host[10]:

> When one cares, there are active moments of caring in which the engrossment must be present. In those moments the cared-for is not an object. In Buber's words: "He is no longer He or She, limited by other Hes and Shes, a dot in the world grid of space and time, nor a condition that can be experienced and described, a loose bundle of named qualities. Neighborless and seamless, he is Thou and fills the firmament." (Noddings 1984: 74)[11]

More generally, the Zen Buddhist spiritual and ethical ideal involves nurturing a caring attitude for others, as exemplified in the idea of *jikaku-kakuta* (自覚覚他), namely that self-awakening is not separate from the awakening of others. Awakening to one's true nature is not complete by reaching enlightenment for oneself alone; it is necessarily accompanied by an ethical demand to help others reach enlightenment and hence to care for their well-being.

Given these parallels, the mutual exchange of host and guest can be understood as a model of caring relations—a dynamic, reciprocal engagement between two awakened individuals. Unlike asymmetrical caring relations (such as those between parent-child or teacher-student), this ideal reflects mutual care between equals. For example, when friends truly care for one another, each is willing to set aside their own concerns to fully receive the other—to let the other be the host. A caring parent or teacher may do the same, but this is not necessarily reciprocated by the child or

[10] In the context of analyzing the same Zen *mondo* we have discussed here, Davis (2017: 237–238) quotes the same passage from Buber to describe what it might mean to experience another person as the host.

[11] Buber's quote appears in *I and Thou* (1970: 59).

the student. As Noddings (1984: 67), drawing on Buber, notes, mutual inclusion or mutual engrossment moves a relationship away from that of teacher-student (or parent-child) to friendship.

Yet true friendship is not only about prioritizing the other. A true friend not only receives me fully when I am in need but also speaks from their own unique perspective. In such relationships —where each person expresses their irreducible individuality—we are challenged to grow, as when we are pressed to reevaluate our basic standpoints and can become a better version of ourselves.

We might even argue that while parent-child or teacher-student relations are asymmetrical for the most part, those occasional meetings of mutual care—where they meet as equals—are vital. Such moments affirm the dialogical nature of our being and strengthen the relationship. In this way, though not universally applicable, the mutual exchange of host and guest offers an ethical ideal of dialogical interdependence.

Following Vilhauer's notion of an "ethics of play," a *care ethics of play* would accordingly emphasize cultivating mutually caring relationships rooted in the reciprocal circulation of self-expression and receptivity. As dialogical beings, we should strive for the "original freedom" to alternate fluidly between playing the role of the absolute host (i.e., absolutely irreplaceable individuality) and the role of the guest (i.e., complete receptivity). One implication of this view is that a truly mutual caring relation requires not just openness to the other but also the capacity to speak one's own unique voice, as seen in the example of true friendship. For Ueda, maintaining this balance is essential to preserving the well-being of the self, preventing self-loss in excessive receptivity.

Yet, Ueda warns of an even greater danger: self-attachment. Our natural tendency toward self-centeredness hinders our capacity to truly engage with others. True friendships are rare, precisely because we are not always ready or able to open ourselves fully to another. Thus, practicing *self-negation*—the practice of releasing one's ego—is critical. This requires sustained effort, reflection, and a willingness to loosen our grip on rigid self-conceptions. In this sense, cultivating a mutually caring relation is inseparable from self-care, as only through freeing the self can we fully care for others.

A care ethics of play, then, invites us to reconsider self-care as an essential component of ethical engagement. By practicing self-negation, we create the conditions for a deeper, more dynamic reciprocity in our

relationships. In the interplay of self and other, host and guest, care and play, we find the foundation for a truly ethical life.

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