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**An Architect's Iaido—From Splendour
to Zanshin: A Journey Towards
Acquiring Spatial Awareness With a
Japanese Sword.**



LIANA PSAROLOGAKI

The ways in which humans carry themselves as entities made of flesh and energy may be commonly determined by nature, nurture, and culture, among other individual and collective factors and conditions. Some of these ways can allow us to become interconnected with different worlds that take place around us. Others may also serve to isolate and protect us, for instance, from hostile situations that may pose a danger. Whilst these ways make an individual what they (choose to) become; they are not always smooth processes founded upon planes of uninterrupted existence. On the contrary, many of the ways we inhabit and make our own, may come from experiencing lived events that are memorable and situated in space-place-time, what I define elsewhere as *veomata*.¹ Allowing those ways to become our own can be seen as acts of active acceptance. To accept in this context may

1 Liana Psarologaki, "Anaesthesia, Sensoma, Veoma: Cyborg Life Modes of Immersion After Deleuze," in *Concepts: A Travelogue*, ed. Bernd Herzogenrath (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 35–44.



indicate an active inclination and disposition. When one accepts, they may prepare themselves to trust a process and afford risk-taking by placing their experiential custody on entities that may not be fully owned yet. This is definitive of that very moment we find ourselves accepting. One of these ways is the process of learning how to use and create space. Of course, space is a term that is so multidimensional that it may entail the risk of becoming commodified and mundane, with its meaning diffused somewhere in between the phenomenological and the Cartesian. Beyond those frameworks of spatial anagnosis,² we may read an experience that is underpinned by spatial gnosis. Such experience presents a holistic way of becoming in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari put it in their seminal book *What Is Philosophy?* in their words, “we are not in the world, we become with the world; we become by contemplating it. Everything is vision, becoming. We become universes.”³

Experiencing spatial gnosis through studying and practicing Japanese martial arts—like most kinds of experiences—requires three dimensions, although in this case they may not be what the quick-witted reader may think they are. The three dimensions of an experience can be articulated as the theory of the experience, the documentation of the experience, and the event of the lived experience per se.⁴ Every dimension can manifest in its own spatiotemporal terms, yet it is intertwined and made up with bodies, minds, objects, spirits and

2 From the Greek *anagnosis*—“act of reading.”

3 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 169.

4 I would like to acknowledge here the insightful and generous teachings of my sensei, Chris Mansfield, as the source of this axiomatic positioning of the different aspects of the spatial experience.

environments. The theory of the experience becomes then a conceptual framework within which the mental rendering of the experience can constitute a notion. The documentation of the experience can be interpreted as a formal framework within which the experience may achieve an observational and pedagogical record, in other words building a disclosive and assimilative archive. The lived experience itself is the dimension that holds sensory immediacy and being-nowness. It can manifest in spatial real-time and may uphold moments of readiness (“*kamae*,” 構え), moments of stretched time, and at times beauty emanating from true spirit. Together, these three dimensions of such experience make a Way—or a “*dō*” (道). Iaidō (居合道)⁵—or the way of drawing the sword—is the Japanese martial art of practicing readiness to accept the unexpected in using and moving with a sword.⁶ It focuses on how to use and create space to respond to threats, maintaining a mindful and alert manner. Iaido is commonly practiced solo these days, with the practitioner assuming the difficult task of imagining a virtual opponent. As such, one may say that it is not essentially martial. It is, however, spatial and carries its own unique architectonics. The basis of the art, which is much more hidden than other arts such as karate, is the almost pre-conscious and in-presence drawing of the sword. Its soul rests with achieving what

5 “Iaido” is composed of *i*: 居る (*iru*) “to exist, to be,” *ai*: 合わす (*awasu*) “to blend, to adapt” and *do*: 道 (*michi*) “path, way.” The compound meaning comes from the saying: “Tsune ni ite, kyu ni awasu” (常にに居て、急に合わす) “exist normally and naturally, be ready to quickly adapt to the situation.” See: “Iaido,” Ryoshinkan Dojo: <https://www.ryoshinkan.org/our-arts/iaido> (accessed 10 May 2026).

6 The three weapons used in Iaido are: the *bokken* (wooden sword), *iaitō* (zinc-aluminium alloy sword, unsharpened), and *shinken* (sharpened steel sword).

in bushido [the principles of life for samurai in feudal Japan] is called Zanshin (残心)—spatial, momentary, and situational awareness. Zanshin is usually associated with the moment of remaining in relaxed awareness after responding to an (imaginary) attack. The road, however, to achieving Zanshin starts—at least in Iaido—with the introduction of the inanimate object, first the wooden sword (bokken) and then a metal sword (iaito). Here, we will focus primarily on the encounter with a Japanese metal sword, which we may interchangeably refer to as “iaito.”

Whilst adding the bokken to one’s extended self in space is an intense experience (in all its three above-mentioned dimensions), becoming acquainted with one’s own iaito sword can be defined by a humble, overwhelming sense of encountering something splendid; an object that is to become an element of the self in space and in spirit. To accept an iaito sword may mean, on this occasion, to start finding one’s own Iaido, a long, quiet, and beautiful sense of self that is initiated in this first moment of splendour. Such may remain constitutive to the experience that may progressively lead to Zanshin—the remainder of spatial awareness. In the words of Gernot Böhme, “splendour, solidity, wealth, nature: one can speak of a language in which material speaks to us”⁷ by means of either synesthetic or social character,⁸ leaving out the spiritual character that envelops the splendour of the Japanese sword, for instance. Splendour as “emergence of wonder”⁹, says

7 Gernot Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures: The Aesthetics of Felt Spaces* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 60.

8 Ibid., 61.

9 Carolina Dayer, “A Magic-Real Gap in Architecture,” *bfo-Journal*, no. 2 (2016): 59.

Carolina Dayer, in the context of magical realism. Dayer also reminds us that it appears also in the martial craftsmanship of Hephaestus [daidala] and quotes Alberto Pérez-Gómez stating that “the principal value of daidala is that of enabling inanimate matter to become magically alive, of reproducing life rather than representing it.”¹⁰ In such experience, splendour becomes a fascination of the self, becoming one with the sword. “If we imagined the position of a fascinated Self, it was because the multiplicity toward which it leans, stretching to the breaking point, is the continuation of another multiplicity that works it and strains it from the inside. In fact, the self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities.”¹¹ The moment of accepting the sword can be a moment of opening to pathways leading to Zanshin. Perhaps the most prominent Japanese swordsman and author of *The Book of Five Rings*¹² Miyamoto Musashi reminds us however: “Do not become obsessed with having splendid weapons,”¹³ as a plea to contain splendour to what it really is: acceptance of beauty beyond aestheticism. On the other hand, Dave Lawry asks in his seminal book *Moving Toward Stillness*:

Why is the martial artist attracted to things of beauty? What is it that makes him seek out beauty in the midst of his violent practice? These, I think, are fundamental questions for the

10 Alberto Pérez-Gómez, “The Myth of Daedalus,” *AA Files*, no. 10 (1988): 50, cited in Dayer, “Magic-Real Gap,” 59.

11 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 249.

12 Miyamoto Musashi, *The Book of Five Rings*, trans. Thomas Cleary (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2011).

13 John Stevens, “Miyamoto Musashi’s ‘Self-Precepts’ and ‘Nine Articles,’” *The Iaido Journal* 2 (2001): <https://ejmas.com/tin/tinframe.htm> (accessed 10 May 2026).

serious budoka. He should look deeply into his training and his journey on the Way to see where beauty lies and to see, more important, what it means in the process of his own maturation as a martial artist.¹⁴

And it may be that splendour and beauty appear in this sense in Plato.¹⁵ In Böhme's words, "these words articulate an everyday sensuousness from which we, in our distanced dealings with things, are worlds apart. Yet, if one remains faithful to the Greek word *aisthesis*, aesthetics is all about this sensuousness. *Aisthesis* means the sensuous-affective attendance to things."¹⁶ If we undress this *aisthesis* of its Westernised ideology of capitalistic pseudo-splendour, we may become able to accept the splendour that the Japanese sword offers at the time of acquaintance. For it is neither the appropriateness of the material *per se* [to *prepon*, τὸ πρέπον, the appropriate one], nor the otherwise exceptional craftsmanship [daidala] on its own that produces it. On the contrary, it may be the threshold between realising that one has so far lived carrying a disconnected self who lacked something vital toward exaltation and entering the realm of the unforeseen wealth of vibrant matter that the sword presents as a future part of an extended self, an entity of significance and dignity whose presence is palpable. One may decide to savour the moment of becoming acquainted with their sword and return to it by redolence for its splendour without becoming fixated on the objecthood attached to it. "Fixation is the way to death; fluidity is the way to life."¹⁷ Fixation on the splendour of the object

14 David Lawry, *Moving Toward Stillness: Lessons in Daily Life from the Martial Ways of Japan* (Tokyo, Rutland, Vermont and Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2000), 97.

15 See *Hippias Major*, a dialogue between Socrates and Hippias.

16 Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 57.

17 Musashi, *Book of Five Rings*.

can be seen perhaps as a symptom of the mainly Western malady of aesthetics that directly linked to capitalism and the pathological relationship between value and currency. This is of course not a new problem. Böhme, mentioned earlier, who notes on material splendour quoting Plato also detects this problem. In his words:

Materiality, in this context, does not refer to an ahistorical or global reality but to our own; that is, it refers to the reality of advanced, usually Western, industrial nations, which, despite all crises and catastrophes, unfold a Babylonian splendour in their metropolises... The aestheticization of our reality consists in the first instance of an extensive presentation of materiality... it is materiality as it emerges and shows itself.¹⁸

Fixation and obsession often come from an association of splendour with an object, which is very common to those who “lavish attention on specific ‘things’, noting the distinctive capacities of efficacious powers of particular material configurations”¹⁹ Jane Bennett notes in drawing from Bruno Latour. The sword, however, in this case, ceases to be merely a collectible or a nomadic lot. It acquires the potentiality to become a spatial entity—an actant with agentic capacity²⁰—that can emerge as such in between the receiver (the person who accepts the sword) and the giver (the person who offers the sword) in a moment of splendour. Materiality can still play a significant role in this, because, after all, the sword is materialised. It is, however, the spatial articulation of material energy in between bodies that sustains splendour, and which is not a mere byproduct of cultural constructivism. It is instead a condition that “might render manifest a subsistent world of non-human vitality. To

18 Böhme, *Atmospheric Architectures*, 57.

19 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), ix.

20 *Ibid.*, 9.

“render manifest” is both to receive and to participate in the shape given to that which is received.”²¹ This encounter can be constitutive to the experience that splendour may serve as a pretext for, and which may lead to Zanshin through studying and practicing Iaido.

The empirical journey from splendour to Zanshin through finding one’s Iaido, by studying to assimilate and practicing to learn, can be articulated spatially using three conceptual schemas. The first conceptual schema is that of the peri-personal sensorium, which defines the sensory understanding of one’s physical and mental presence when attending space and having the capacity to accept events taking place in it. It may often entail having to obtain a “beginner’s attitude” to be able to accept being susceptible to virtual possibilities. In Iaido, this includes imagining virtual mirrors (opponents), practicing in detail, and utilizing space in the most natural yet unnatural ways. The second conceptual schema concerns achieving posthuman immersion—a state of heightened attention by doing (instead of thinking to do) and becoming a cyborg with an alien object that progressively becomes kin, and which is a non-human entity with its own materiality; the Japanese sword. The latter, in such spatiotemporal condition, becomes integral part of an extended self yet remains autonomous. The final schema uses the first two schemas—peri-personal sensorium and posthuman immersion—to reframe the concept of Zanshin as fragile state of accepting worlds to come. Zanshin in this case is conceptualised as a condition of worlding in between calmness (zen) and readiness (kamae) that transcends the very problematic

21 Ibid., 19.

binary of fight or flight modality when a virtual or real threat appears.²²

A Peri-personal Sensorium

The encounter of an iaidoka with their first sword can be an encounter of material and spatial splendour. Much of the existing conceptual treatise of splendour in mainstream aestheticism concentrates, as expected, on the phenomenological account of the object and often an interplay between materials (the object is made of) and light (reflected on the surfaces of the materials the object is made of). Considering new aesthetics in architecture, space, and the experience of them, we can transcend the phenomenological ontology towards a “becomology”²³ of experience, which is the prepon (appropriate) concept to frame the empirical journey from splendour to Zanshin in Iaido study and practice. This is because a becomology is a space that affords, among other multiplicities, the emergence of non-human sensory entities as equal actants and intertwinement of those in the creation of sensory experiences made together with living bodies and environments. A becomology implies a contextualisation in space and time of a convivial arrangement and articulation of energies, matter, and substance, as well as incorporeal entities. These may intensify, stretch, flow, and halt while producing conditions within which bodily actions, thoughts, and spiritual manifestation interplay.

22 In Iaido, the “pre-text” is the emergence of a potential threat—real or imagined—that triggers readiness.

23 Anne Sauvagnargues, “Wasp and Orchid: On Multiplicities and Becomology,” in *Aberrant Nuptial 2: Deleuze and Artistic Research*, ed. [editor] (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Orpheus Institute, 2019), 177–81.

Sense, as the act of affectively receiving stimuli, can be seen as a fundamental concept in new aesthetics and part of the world of becomings, virtualities, and multiplicities. More by default, and less by chance, it is a developmental concept in any iaidoka's journey to Zanshin. We may imagine this as an extensive spatial sense of self, fundamentally. To understand it, we may need to examine it within the existence of a sensorium, a term also belonging to new aesthetics, drawing from the field of neuroscience called "neuroexistentialism." Joseph Dumit explains:

If our sensorium is the sensing package that constitutes our participation in the world... this assemblage of sensory inputs defines our boundaries, making the world present to us and by subtraction making us present to ourselves as beings in the world. This package can only seem to do this if it disappears—if it works invisibly, silently, quickly, and reliably.²⁴

Iaido, as the masterful drawing of the Japanese sword, only achieves its purpose in the same way: invisibly, silently, quickly, convincingly, and reliably. The quickness, however, in the context of Iaido study and practice refers to the timely presence and movement with the sword, as well as the convincing responsiveness to both immediate and non-immediate, albeit always virtual, threats. From the splendour of being acquainted to one's own bodily extension—the Japanese sword—, to achieving Zanshin may lay a slow pathway of realisation, sensory recalibration, neuroplasticity and self-awareness of anatomical capacity and physics—the ongoing building of a peri-personal sensory and spatial architecture of oneself and the sword as one. In this journey "[the]

24 Joseph Dumit, "Neuroexistentialism," in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 182.

attitude should be [to achieve] alertness mixed with calmness and fearlessness”²⁵ —Zanshin.

Using the term peri-personal to refer to the sensory architecture of Iado does not imply a phenomenology, where the body using, making space and moving with the sword—the iaidoka—is in the centre of this world making. On the contrary, it repositions the iaidoka’s body to the periphery giving space (and aesthetic value) to the sword. Both sword and human are equal relata in the complex equation of studying and practicing Iado. Essentially, the sword can become a constitutional part of the iaidoka’s sensorium, which extends beyond the limits of the fingertips. Peri-personal space in this sense is not confined within “the space surrounding the body whose limits are the working limits of our arms’ reach... defined by the motor potentialities of our body.”²⁶ It becomes extended within a wider sensorium to include one’s sword, the scabbard that complements the blade in movement, and other entities attached to those core actants including the kissaki (切先)—the material tip of the sword’s blade—and the kensaki (剣先). The latter defines the boundary to the peri-personal space of the iaidoka and the point at which the threat must be kept and carries its own splendour. Apart from its semiological value as a point of precision and its functional capacity of being the point of contact to the imaginary body of the opponent—the threat—, kissaki (and kensaki) is a point of admiration for its caretaker, who is no other than the iaidoka it belongs to.

25 Darrell Craig, *Iai: The Art of Drawing the Sword* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 1981).

26 Vittorio Gallese, “Bodily Framing,” in *Experience: Culture, Cognition and the Common Sense*, eds. Caroline A. Jones, Rebecca Uchill, and David Mather (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 240.

Posthuman Immersion

The peri-personal space created by the sword and rendered by the kissaki and kensaki may entail the space within which kamae may happen and Zanshin may be achieved. Sometimes this space may feel extended and expansive at the end of a cut, and other times it can be firmly enclosed and intimate; almost defined by an invisible membrane outlining the confident, resting figure of the iaidoka and their sword in scabbard (saya). The peri-personal sensorium can be described then as the sensory apparatus made possible by the human flesh+sword becoming one that allows an acknowledgement of the space one finds themselves situating with in, including one's own body, mind, and spiritual presence, associated actants, and of course threats and other environmentally inscribed stimuli. This is potentially a space of intensities and intensive capacities. Manuel De Landa defines a space of intensity as a space where "matter becomes an active agent"²⁷ and the virtual world (as a construct of possibilities) assigned to it as "immanent to the material world."²⁸ In studying and practicing Iaido, Zanshin may be progressively achieved when the matter of flesh+sword starts acquiring intensity (and therefore agency) and the virtual threat (imaginary opponent) progressively becomes immanent within the material world as real (albeit not actual), through sensing to learn what is not there. Getting accustomed to an extended peri-personal sensorium that the splendour of a Japanese sword initiates implies the development of a self of sense, in addition to a sense of self.

27 Manuel DeLanda, "Space: Extensive and Intensive, Actual and Virtual," in *Deleuze and Space*, eds. Ian Buchanan and Gregg Lambert (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 82.

28 Ibid., 85.

Sensing, learning, and memory are inherent to life; vital properties occur at all levels of an organism's existence. Every aspect of ourselves that we have been or will be, from a single cell to the integrated organism, from five seconds ago to now, exists by detecting and comparing self to non-self, predicted to be observed, this ongoing flux of negotiations generates the fluid, often-fallible self of sense. We cannot attend to everything we perceive ... [and] self and sense are not limited to the neurons and extend well beyond the brain.²⁹

This notion of the human capacity to be selectively absent-minded yet in a contemplative state can become fundamental to conceptualizing, studying, and practicing Iaido in spatial terms. South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han reminds us most pertinently that the ability to immerse in contemplation is a characteristic of being human. He says that "the animal is forced to divide its attention between various activities... incapable of contemplative immersion. The animal cannot immerse itself contemplatively in what it is facing [Gegenüber] because it must also process background events."³⁰ With the latter, Han refers, among other things, to the everyday threats posed by predators and other feral animals in competition. The capacity to engage in splendour and progressively achieve Zanshin through studying and practicing Iaido, can be associated with contemplative immersion, away from the so-called cave effect often encountered in virtual reality (VR) environments and headsets. Contemplative immersion uses actual space and may penetrate everyday life beyond the dojo (or any other similarly and temporarily designated place for practicing). It may also involve virtual space made

29 Leah Kelly, "Self of Sense," in *Experience: Culture, Cognition and the Common Sense*, eds. Caroline A. Jones, Rebecca Uchill, and David Mather (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 211–12.

30 Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 12–13.

up by an imaginary opponent who initiates action by emerging and potentially posing a threat. Above all, it may include an entity that is full of undeniable splendour—a Japanese sword.

For the *iaidoka* to become purposefully immersed in the world of “their own *iai*,” they may need to accept the sword as a companion species, and themselves as cyborg entities.³¹ This allows us to consider the study and practice of *Iaido* within the realm of posthumanism. In the posthuman condition, says Donna Haraway, “boundaries are less about the skin than about statistically defined densities of signal and noise.”³² Haraway refers to signal and noise to imply a condition where sense and sensory engagement are complicated and involve a matrix of concomitant responses to intimate and remote stimuli. As previously said, one cannot be fully perceiving and applying their focused attention in all those stimuli with the same intensity and vigour at any moment. In the contemplative moment of immersing oneself in *Zanshin*, which may involve sustaining a sliver of alertness to the threat that may be real but not actual, one is expected to remain in sensory connectedness with the splendid actant—the sword—in *kamae*. This, too, can be viewed as characteristically posthuman and is at the same time embedded in the cells of the everyday life.

Even the most elementary life forms could not develop if they would not carry within themselves some ideality, incorporeality, directionality or purposiveness. Life is composed of these material-ideal relations, and it always oscillates be-

31 Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*. (Chicago, IL: Prickly Parading Press, 2003).

32 *Ibid.*, 21.

tween its virtual, incorporeal dimension and its actual material incarnations.³³

This notion of life brings us back to the moment of splendour that activates the sword as vibrant matter, acquiring as such a certain vitality. In the latter, Bennett articulates “the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will or designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own.”³⁴ In the case of studying and practicing Iaido and the sensory trajectory from splendour to Zanshin, the quasi agent and actant become constitutive to the experience and the space which is rendered by it in time.

Achieving Zanshin

Caroline A. Jones writes with regards to our everyday and mediated sensoria that “no schema can capture the diversity in any present.”³⁵ In the same fashion, neither our two first schemas—peri-personal sensorium and posthuman immersion—nor this last scheme offering a reflective account on achieving Zanshin can be read as an exhaustive account of lived experiences in the process and progress of studying and practicing Iaido. Together with our most splendid quasi-agent of space—the sword—come, for instance, the complicated rituals of getting dressed in hakama and the hakama’s own archi-

33 Audrone Žukauskaitė and S. E. Wilmer, “Forms of Life in the Posthuman Condition: An Introduction,” in *Life in the Posthuman Condition: Critical Responses to the Anthropocene* ed. Audrone Žukauskaitė and S. E. Wilmer (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 6.

34 Bennet, *Vibrant Matter*, viii.

35 Caroline A. Jones, “The Mediated Sensorium,” in *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Caroline A. Jones (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 6.

ecture, the attentive paying respects to all critical relata of Iaido including sword, sensei, shomen, and otagai (rei), and the ever so nuanced wearing and dealing with one's own sageo cord. The set of schemas articulated here eclectically focuses on the sword itself as companion to the iaidoka and its contribution to a peri-personal journey that starts with splendour to progressively achieve Zanshin.

This exploration of Iaido as an art of architectural dimensionality and spatial worlding is important because it can pave new avenues for reclaiming mental and somatic balance through space. It may furthermore contribute to humans accepting our posthuman-cyborg selves connected to objects that become kin and are full of splendour. It does so by subtly but systematically abandoning the westernised binary of fight or flight as the only two modes of possible existence in times of spatial—or any other form of—crisis (think of a panic attack and how many of us have recently grown to react to everyday worries). Beyond fight or flight exists Zanshin—a condition of balanced alertness and calmness, a contemplative immersion in which we are not alone. We are with the sword; we are with the world. To accept the potentiality of such condition is a step towards developing progressive awareness that in ones' peri-personal sensorium, by being a sword-bearing cyborg, one can become immersed in a state of fragile equilibrium in accepted imbalance. It is critical to note, that a presence of splendour carried by studying and practicing Iaido with a sword and its associated paraphernalia, including the formality of etiquette and expected nobility and dignity expressed by the iaidoka even beyond the dojo, can be constitutional to achieving Zanshin. Splendour, in this instance, can be the pre-text; the sensory springboard

for accepting the sword-as-kin. Becoming one with it in space and time may also lead to becoming immersed in the art of allowing it to create new spaces and new experiences. This thought allows us to start considering new means that allow for—more sustainable and healthier—states of connectivity with oneself and the world one progressively occupies and acts within.

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