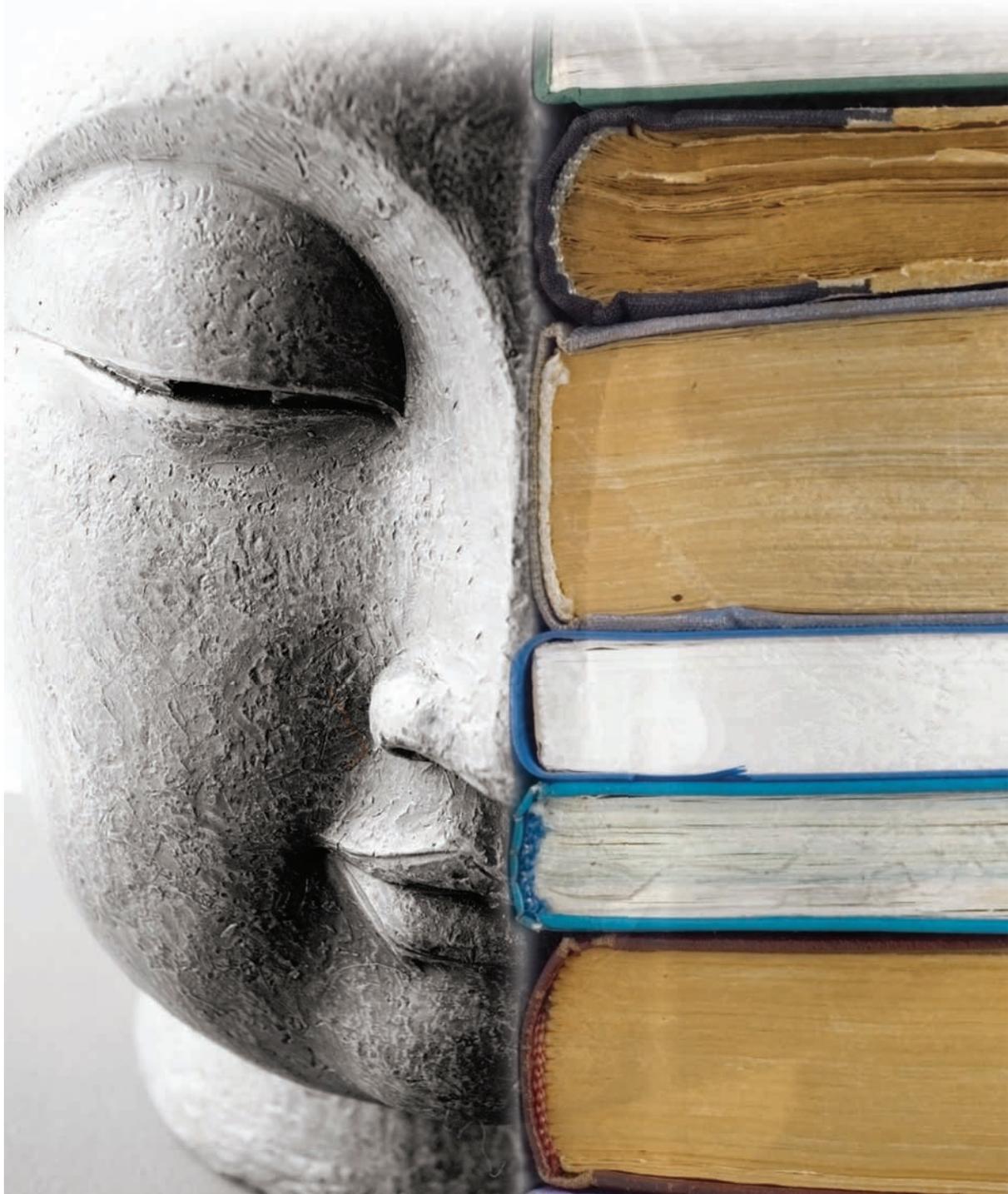


# THE EMERGENCE OF BUDDHIST AMERICAN LITERATURE

Edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff

Foreword by Maxine Hong Kingston ▪ Afterword by Charles Johnson



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**THE EMERGENCE OF  
BUDDHIST AMERICAN  
LITERATURE**

SUNY SERIES IN BUDDHISM AND AMERICAN CULTURE

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John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff, *editors*

# **THE EMERGENCE OF BUDDHIST AMERICAN LITERATURE**

EDITED BY  
**JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE  
GARY STORHOFF**

FOREWORD BY MAXINE HONG KINGSTON  
AND  
AFTERWORD BY CHARLES JOHNSON

**SUNY**  
P R E S S

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Published by  
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS  
ALBANY

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For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY  
*www.sunypress.edu*

Production by Diane Ganeles  
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

The emergence of Buddhist American literature / edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff ; foreword by Maxine Hong Kingston ; afterword by Charles Johnson.  
p. cm. — (Sunny series in Buddhism and American culture)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4384-2653-2 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. American literature—Buddhist authors—History and criticism. 2. American literature—20th century—History and criticism. 3. American literature—Buddhist influences. 4. Buddhism in literature. 5. Buddhism and literature—United States.  
I. Whalen-Bridge, John, 1961– II. Storhoff, Gary, 1947–

PS153.B83E44 2009

810.9'382943—dc22

2008034847

*John Whalen-Bridge would like to dedicate his work  
on The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature  
to his two sons, Thomas and William.*

*Gary Storhoff would like to dedicate his work  
on this volume to those who have taught him  
the Buddhist principle of the wondrous nature of everyday life:  
his wife, Linda; his daughter, Danielle; and his son, Wesley.*

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## CONTENTS

Foreword by <i>Maxine Hong Kingston</i>	ix
Acknowledgments	xi
Introduction <i>John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff</i>	1
<b>PART I</b>   Literature as Vehicle: Transmission and Transformation	
<b>1</b> The Emptiness of Patterned Flux: Ernest Fenollosa's Buddhist Essay "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry" <i>Jonathan Stalling</i>	21
<b>2</b> Gary Snyder's Selective Way to Cold Mountain: Domesticating Han Shan <i>Yuemin He</i>	45
<b>3</b> John Giorno: Buddhism, Poetry, and Transgression <i>Marcus Boon</i>	63
<b>4</b> Buddhadharma and Poetry without Credentials <i>Michael Heller</i>	83

PART II		Zen, Vajrayana, and the Avant-Garde: A Pluralistic Poetics	
5		Finger Pointing at the Moon: Zen and the Poetry of Philip Whalen <i>Jane Falk</i>	103
6		Keeping Vision Alive: The Buddhist Stillpoint in the Work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg <i>Erik Mortenson</i>	123
7		Illumination Through the Cracks: The Melting Down of Conventional Socio-Religious Thought and Practice in the Work of Gary Snyder <i>Tom Lavazzi</i>	139
8		The American Poetic Diamond Vehicle: Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman Re-Work Vajrayana Buddhism <i>Jane Augustine</i>	155
PART III		Widening the Circle: Buddhism and American Writers of Color	
9		Buddhism, the Chinese Religion, and the Ceremony of Writing: An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston <i>John Whalen-Bridge</i>	177
10		A Bridge between Two Worlds: Crossing to America in <i>Monkey Bridge</i> <i>Hanh Nguyen and R. C. Lutz</i>	189
11		'Opening the Hand of Thought': The Meditative Mind in Charles Johnson's <i>Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories</i> <i>Gary Storchhoff</i>	207
		Afterword <i>Charles Johnson</i>	229
		List of Contributors	243
		Index	247

## FOREWORD

I am certain that writers can transmit the Dharma, and that by reading, one can become an enlightened being.

And yet, when Tripitaka Tang and Monkey unrolled the scrolls of the sutras that the Buddhists gave them, the paper was blank. The pilgrims went back up the Silk Road and demanded the correct scrolls. The Buddhists exchanged those blanks for scrolls that had words written on them. They laughed at the fools who had the right, empty scrolls all along.

And here's a story of our own time: Sherdyl Motz, while on a gunboat patrolling the Soirap River, a branch of the Mekong, Vietnam, quiet in the starry night, invented breathing meditation.

I myself invented Nikon meditation, as well as astral projection, entrance to former incarnations, awake dreaming, silence, solitary retreating, *sanghas*, and many rituals.

The platonic Dharma makes its way to anyone. It does not have to be in the form of words.

And yet, some of us—scriptophiles—spend lifetimes writing. This book in your hands is a trove of the best we can do to put the Dharma into words.

By the way, the Dharma emerged already in the nineteenth century to American writers, who called it Transcendentalism. This book is a gathering of some thinking and imagining that Buddhists are doing now. Wonderful—enough scholarship, stories, and poems to make a genre: Buddhist American Literature.

While you can self-reliantly follow the Buddha's path, it's fun to read other people's experiences and to listen to teachers. And they give you signposts along the way.

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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letters (11 September 1958 and 26 July 1960) in the Allen Ginsberg Collection (MO733).

Special thanks to the Executors of the Philip Whalen Literary Estate for permission to quote from his work.

# Introduction

JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE  
AND GARY STORHOFF

BUDDHISM AND AMERICAN  
IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

Postwar American writers rebelled in a variety of ways.<sup>1</sup> Writers in the first twenty years after the war struggled against censorship laws and canons of taste, and court cases were fought about books dealing with sex in an explicit manner. Books such as *Lolita* and *Catcher in the Rye* were the site of censorship battles between librarians and church groups, not just because these books brought up sex as a subject, but also because they presented conventional tastes regarding literature, art, and morality as ridiculously provincial or as phony.<sup>2</sup> Buddhist writers from this period such as J.D. Salinger, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg, to name some of the most famous Buddhist popularizers of the 1950s, did both. They experimented with a kind of formlessness in which the work took on the qualities of a mind supposed to be freer from delusion than those against which that mind was being defined. The Glass stories, Snyder's mixing of Poundian translation and indigenous song, and Ginsberg's charming and elegant yawp from the rooftop were all forms of complaint against mainstream society, which was felt to be crassly materialistic, a society of people too selfish to appreciate the literary celebration of generosity. In the words of Hettie Jones, the Beats were interested in Buddhism as an "antimaterialist point of view" that was "very attractive to those of us who

were disaffected with the organized religion we were brought up with” (Mortenson 7). Not all of the writing bore the marks of complaint, but, if the First Noble Truth is that everything in life is pervasively unsatisfactory, the writers most interested in Buddhism bore witness, through Buddhist-inflected stories and poems, to the most unsatisfactory dimensions of American life.

To note that Buddhist American literature was rebellious is not very surprising, since this literature was surely born of the same conditions as other well-known works of the period.<sup>3</sup> If Buddhism was spread through Asia by royalty and other elites, it served the needs of a different subset in America: the countercultural intelligentsia who found the pleasure palace of America wanting. If Buddhist references and convention-challenging aesthetic notions were a mark of the literary avant-garde, it is also true that literature itself was the avant-garde of the movement of Buddhism into America: ideas discussed by D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts were multiplied tenfold in the work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. Without this literary amplification, it is doubtful that Buddhism would exist as it does in the United States today, a country of three hundred or so metropolitan areas, each of which has practicing Buddhist groups. To say that the Buddhism of the early Beats was merely literary is to underestimate rather drastically the significance of American poetry and fiction in the transmission and transformation of Buddhist beliefs, practices, and institutions.

Against the “poetry-does-nothing” ethos of Modernist literature and criticism, Buddhist writers in America are anything but quiescent. Allen Ginsberg has urged audiences, in his comic-yet-incantatory style, to meditate and to quit smoking. Gary Snyder has envisaged problems and specific, workable (if ignored by everyone in power save Al Gore) solutions to problems such as our over-reliance on fossil fuels. As Michael Davidson has noted, such writers worked with avant-garde poetics and systems of ideas such as Buddhism to develop a sense of community among the alienated. A work of literature provides readers with a shared object so that we may share the most personal of ideas, and so the poems, plays, and fictions have undergirded large identity movements such as the women’s movements, ethnic identity movements, and also the struggle of homosexuals to reconstruct themselves as citizens with full rights and full status. Literary expression itself does not typically lead to direct changes in law, to a reconfiguration of culture away from prejudice, but literature does supplement these struggles in important ways. Such movements often require the invention of a corporate self—an African American or a female or a gay person—who stands for the group, and yet that identity

claim can also work hand-in-hand with the stereotyping that activists in such groups presumably wish to subvert. On the one hand, a significant claim is put forward—for example, black men are seen as dangerous or inferior by a world in which the conscious values or value-laden life-ways of white men prevail; on the other hand, the positive counter-self that is put forward, whether it be the highly productive “race man” or the macho nationalist who forcefully refuses such representations, is just as much of a stick figure as the negative stereotype that is being rejected.

Literature helps out by providing not the assertion of innumerable private differences, but rather a set of shared objects that are composed of representations of the private and personal. To change laws, the agents of a movement must convincingly argue that a typical woman in a professional position makes less money than a man in a similar position; to change minds, the agents need to make people care not about percentages but about people. Books like *Invisible Man* and *The Woman Warrior* make the private agony of the question “Who am I?” something that can be shared, and the author’s effort, the necessary seduction of literature, is in making that painful question attractive. Buddhism, according to its most conservative interpreters, is a way of life in which one turns away from pleasures (perfumes, dancing girls, songs, and so forth), and so the cultivation of aesthetic pleasure could be construed as a distraction. Another foreseeable objection to the idea that literature and Buddhist practice can reinforce each other shifts attention from the effects of literature on readers to the genesis of the work: William Burroughs complained, after sitting through a lengthy meditation retreat, that calmness of mind was of no use to him as a novelist. Insofar as a writer makes *samsara* attractive and all aesthetic objects are by definition more attractive than not, she or he is turning the reader away from the real work of freeing the mind from the shackles of desire. But insofar as the writer is making it possible to understand, compassionately, someone else’s private agony (that she or he may alter conditions and escape *samsara*), then the same literary text could be understood to operate in a “Buddhistic” fashion.

The chief paradox of “Buddhist Literature” is that it helps provide the conditions, as Benedict Anderson has argued newspapers did for modern nations, for the formation of a Buddhist imagined community, though this particular corporate identity forms itself around the idea that identity itself is a delusion.<sup>4</sup> There is an aesthetic solution to this paradox: If the work of art affirms identity not in terms of a self-existent soul or a chosen people but rather as an impermanent and fully contingent artifact, the identity that is produced by such songs will at least have relative merit over those self-concepts that do not build into themselves assertions of impermanence.

## LITERATURE AS VEHICLE

*The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* is divided into three sections: "Literature as Vehicle: Transmission and Transformation"; "A Pluralistic Poetics: Zen, Vajrayana, and the Avant-garde"; and "Widening the Circle: Buddhism and American Writers of Color." Essays in the first section, "Literature as Vehicle," focus on the ways in which Asian cultural traditions were inflected and conditioned as they made their way into American culture, as do all the essays in this collection, but essays in this section emphasize especially the ways in which literary embodiment—as it socialized the words into a world of authors, editors, readers, and teachers—exerts a pressure on the transmission of ideas from one culture to another. Whether or not the idealized mind-to-mind transmission of awareness can be traced from Buddha's India through China and Japan to zendos in America, it can hardly be said that an Asian body of thought has been adopted without adaptation.<sup>5</sup> This body of thought has been scorned as the mere vehicle of transmission rather than the more important transmitted essence, such as in the well-known idea that the finger pointing to the moon should not be mistaken for the moon. Whether there is an unconditioned awareness that can be traced back through a human lineage from someone in, say, San Francisco all the way to Buddha himself is not the sort of question these essays will answer. The essays in this section examine the particular agents involved in the literary transmission of Buddhist practices and values, including poets, scholars, editors, and religious teachers.

"Literature as Vehicle" includes essays about the work of four writers, Ernest Fenollosa, Gary Snyder, John Giorno, and Michael Heller, to show in detail how strands of Buddhism have been conditioned by particular historical and editorial factors as they made their way into American culture. Fenollosa was a Buddhist convert who transmitted Buddhist ideas through influential essays and translations. Snyder is a Buddhist convert who has developed a full *oeuvre* of poetry and prose about the interrelations between Buddhism, poetry, ethnopoetics, deep ecology, and even utopian calls for our return to preindustrial ways of relating to the earth.

In "The Emptiness of Patterned Flux: Ernest Fenollosa's Buddhist Essay 'The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,'" Jonathan Stalling seeks to recover Fenollosa from his position as one of several laborers in Ezra Pound's factory for *Making It New*. Fenollosa's role as an inspirational figure in "the Pound Era" is not to be doubted, but Fenollosa was much more than a footnote to Pound. In looking at the transpacific cultural migration of Buddhism from the Far East to the United States,

it is necessary that we understand the role of particular cultural actors, whose editorial decisions and creative emphases may or may not represent the needs and tastes of a larger cultural system. Stalling attends in particular to Pound's distaste for Buddhism in his treatment of Fenollosa's essay: "While leaving the essay's basic Eastern-philosophy-inspired poetics intact, Pound actively deletes many of the original essay's more Buddhist rhetoric." Our understanding of Fenollosa, and thus of one of the most important figures in the transmission of Buddhism to America, is sharply curtailed first by Pound's anti-Buddhist editorial practices, and secondly by the equation among subsequent readers that Zen Buddhism represents all Buddhism. Stalling looks carefully at the play of ideas in Fenollosa's texts in ways that provide a very fresh introduction to Fenollosa's contributions.

In "Gary Snyder's Selective Way to Cold Mountain: Domesticating Han Shan," Yuemin He provides readers with the most complete account to date not only of Snyder's choices as an editor and a translator; this essay also situates Snyder's groundbreaking work among that of subsequent Han Shan translators such as Burton Watson, Red Pine (Bill Porter), and Robert G. Henricks. Most of the initial readers of Snyder's work would never have heard of Han Shan, and many Chinese students of American literature have been startled at Han Shan's high place in the American version of the Chinese canon. In a 1992 interview Snyder was asked how he discovered Han Shan and how he responded to those who thought he had "made him up." Snyder did not make up this poet, but He points out that Snyder's American Han Shan is in many ways a conditioned construction. Snyder did not, in the manner of Kent Johnson inventing Yasusada and publishing translated poems under that name, make up poems or mistranslate the ones he chose in any egregious way, but He argues that Snyder selected poems and translated them in a way designed to highlight the most bohemian and worldly aspects of the ancient Chinese poet. Whereas, according to He's characterization, Han Shan's poems foreground a renunciation in which "Worldly gains, whether youth or wealth or fame or beauty, are always impermanent and unworthy of pursuing," Snyder "wants to immerse himself deeply in this world." For He, Snyder's romantic portrait of Han Shan was not a window into Chinese culture "but a mirror that gave Americans their own reflections." If one looks at Snyder in an accusatory way, he is part of a larger discourse, to use the word in Michel Foucault's sense, that constructed an Oriental Other precisely in order to craft a particular kind of self through contradistinction. Looked at another way, Snyder's poetic selections, alongside those of subsequent poet-translators, carefully mark the historical encounter between English-speaking readers and an

ancient Chinese poet. These poems—and our commentaries on them—are the flagstones that make the path more walkable.

Marcus Boon's essay "John Giorno: Buddhism, Poetry, and Transgression" presents the work of a poet who insists he is "not a Buddhist poet" while also insisting he is "not a non-Buddhist poet." A *kōan*-like conundrum is presented to the reader in which poetic mosaics, including references to Buddhist practice and Tibetan iconography, is freely mixed with poems about sado-masochistic sex. With titles *Cancer in My Left Ball* and *Shit Piss Blood Pus and Brains*, readers may be forgiven for wondering why the poet is thought to be a "Buddhist poet," but the poems manifest, insistently, a concurrence of carnal desire and a devotion to at least the names and forms associated with Buddhism. Giorno uses Buddhist motifs and images in ways that some readers will find strikingly un-Buddhist, a concern he acknowledges in conversations with Boon. Many Asian Buddhists, already puzzled by America's bohemian modes of transmission, must be puzzled to the point of exasperation by just the title of his book *Balling Buddha*, and the title is clearly meant as a provocation to American readers as well. Perhaps there is a Buddhist /Bohemian pride in saying, through such a title, something like "We do not have to fear charges of blasphemy, as we are nondualistically comfortable with the body-mind in all its richness." One simple solution would be to say that *violent avant-garde imagery* is, if it is "Buddhist," unsuccessfully Buddhist, but one could just as easily say that Giorno's work testifies to the Second Noble Truth, in which craving is found to be the root of all suffering.<sup>6</sup> Boon examines the formal properties through which Giorno, like many of his non-Buddhist avant-garde associates, develops such shocking conjunctures precisely to throw the reader, via disjunctive and often funny poetry, into a more mindful state.

Finally, Michael Heller's autobiographical essay identifies the eclectic strands that thread through his work and that of many other contemporary writers, making it hard to know what ideas are Buddhist and what are not; influences on his work include Wittgenstein, Objectivist poets and poet-ics, Vajrayana Buddhism, and Phenomenological thinkers such as Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. These essays together enlarge our understanding of the ways in which Buddhism as a cultural entity has shaped particular poet-transmitters as it came through the custom house of the imagination. The task of understanding the transmission of Buddhism to America requires the careful examination of such documents, however much the most warmly received Buddhist teachings in America have warned against following such indications—the true Way being pathless, a way devoid of marks and traces akin to the path of a bird across the sky. Marks and traces—writings and other self-assertions—are, according to such a rhetoric,

evidence of attachment. Gary Snyder often enjoys referring to the opening lines of the *Tao Te Ching* to show that this paradox is often handled playfully rather than as a vexing contradiction. If “he who speaks does not know,” and if “he who knows does not speak,” then all that follows is a waste of time and the *Tao Te Ching* should be used as tinder. The resolution of this contradiction is simply to acknowledge that there is no contradiction between nonattachment and caring for something, as Gary Snyder argues, against those who take refuge from the responsibility of caring for things, in his poem-with-prose “After Bamiyan”: “Ah yes . . . impermanence. But this is never a reason to let compassion and focus slide, or to pass off the suffering of others because they are merely impermanent beings (*Danger on Peaks* 101).

So what is a Buddhist writer? Ambivalence about the identity of the Buddhist writer figures in several of the essays collected here. Boon’s essay thus presents readers with a problematic case to further the consideration of the question, “What is a Buddhist writer?” Is this a biographical question, one having to do with a conversion experience or self-description? Perhaps we should look at the literature in a behavioral way to ask whether such poems, typically, produce greater mindfulness, and, if so, whether this makes them different from any other poems. Or is Giorno’s poetry evidence supporting Thanissaro Bhikku’s charge in *Tricycle Magazine* that American Buddhism is a form of “Romantic Buddhism,” a selection of Buddhist ideas that includes ego-sustaining therapy and notions of emptiness that license individual freedom but which has been much less enthusiastic about the idea of renunciation—about the radical suspicion of human desire? Boon’s essay does not come to a conclusion about this question, but these questions will emerge with greater clarity as our understanding of writers like Giorno becomes clearer.

The question “Who is a Buddhist writer?” also arises in Heller’s essay “Buddhadharma and Poetry without Credentials.” Like Giorno, Heller is a practicing poet who has been influenced by the “Crazy Wisdom” teachings of Ven. Chögyam Trungpa, a Tibetan teacher who came to the United States in 1970 and came to influence writers such as Giorno, Heller, Jane Augustine (whose writing is also included in this volume), Allen Ginsberg, Diane di Prima, William Burroughs, and even Joni Mitchell.<sup>7</sup> As Stalling and He reflect on the ways in which the particular desires of writers such as Pound and Snyder have shaped the transmission of Buddhism to America, those by Giorno and Heller develop the picture of how influential particular teachers such as Chögyam Trungpa have been. Whereas Fenollosa and writers like him went to Asia and learned Asian languages as part of their work as cultural emissaries, writers such as Giorno and Heller read widely

and studied with a particular Tibetan-in-exile, one known for taking great delight in upsetting expectations. (To Burroughs, Trungpa was known as “the whiskey lama,” and the infamous party at which Trungpa demanded that his “Vajra Guards” strip poet W. S. Merwin against his will so that he would lose his ego is recounted in Tom Clark’s *Naropa Poetry Wars*.) Heller’s experiences with Trungpa are set alongside his epistolary apprenticeship with poet George Oppen, his studies of phenomenology, and his own developing practice as a poet. While Heller notes that “the role of the Buddhist-inflected arts” in Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism “are ethical and moral but also philosophically fundamental to human interaction,” the lines between art and religion become quite indistinct: “poetry and a Buddhist outlook or perspective seem nearly identical.” That said, Heller traces a movement toward a set of ideas and references, not all Buddhist, that seem to develop from similar perceptions of human existence and seem to move toward similar solutions to the human predicament (understood from a Buddhist point of view). When Heller refers to “Cézanne’s Doubt” as a “particularly Buddhist piece of writing,” he acknowledges what is common to Cézanne, Merleau-Ponty, his own work, and to poetic ancestors such as Oppen and Zukofsky, namely the “moment of original vision” described by Buddhist scholar Herbert V. Guenther in a book he co-authored with Chögyam Trungpa, *The Dawn of Tantra*.

The common ground between Buddhism and avant-garde forms of art and philosophy will, for some interpreters, signal shifts in the way “the West” thinks, but for others the commonality will engender suspicions that orientalist writers and other kinds of cultural middle-men are selecting images and ideas in order to make, as Heller argues, a picture of the Other designed especially to flatter the self. While Heller embraces a religious path that is poetical, and a poetic path that is religious, both aspects of this engagement are celebrated for their freedom from “credentials,” a word that reeks of bureaucratic licenses and official criteria that have drifted away from the substance of any particular matter. The language of Heller’s description, drawn from Trungpa, is redolent of the freedoms from constraint embraced by all of the dharma bums since Kerouac’s *roman à clef* was first published, but Heller reflects critically on this point: “Poets don’t write to teach, yet it does seem obvious that the poet inclined toward a Buddhist disposition is aware that what he or she writes is a kind of teaching, a sense that the poems one writes will affect others, and therefore have an ethical dimension.” The sentence reveals not so much a fracture between art and religion as a shift in the primary understanding of art. The uselessness of art is one of its typical functions, we might say: If you wear it or use it as a tool, it is less prestigious than if you can only enjoy it “aesthetically.” A Tibetan sacred painting, like older

iconic works in Christian countries, is meant, on the other hand, to be *used*, and when Heller shifts from saying “Poets don’t write to teach” to “what he or she writes is a kind of teaching,” he is moving away from the Modernist conception of art and, perhaps against the grain, toward a didactic notion of art that would resonate more directly with much religious art in the world. One consequence of this shift is the realization that the liberatory dharma bum can only be a stage along such a path rather than a final destination: “What this may also mean then is that the old role of bohemian poet, isolated and estranged from society, is no longer applicable.”

#### A PLURALISTIC POETICS

The notion of the bohemian poet does not go away in the works discussed in the second section of this collection, but the idea that the writer must be “isolated and estranged from society” is an idea that these poets seem to be working against in their literary creations. It is not the case that any of these writers identify with middle America—Gary Snyder is careful to say that he could *almost* love this America in his poem “Maverick Bar.” Perhaps it could be said that the bohemian rebellion of these early Buddhist writings is not evidence of Buddhism’s so-called quietism, meaning the idea that the world is fallen, that one should turn away from it, and that one should avoid associating with those who are still attached to the world. There has been a world movement, spearheaded by the exiled Vietnamese teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, called “Engaged Buddhism,” which stipulates that social action is a proper field of practice: Mahayana Buddhists pledge to place the enlightenment of others before that of self, and so a mindful (rather than aggressive and hateful) mode of political action is discussed as a positive form of engagement. If one kind of bohemian is analogous to the sage who is too wise to be caught in the snare of worldly problems, another might be the cynic who is only too happy to live among other people so as to sap resources from them. The Buddhist bohemian of these essays is something different. The motto from Thomas Pynchon—“keep cool, but care,” captures the idea, as the figures who walk through the work by Philip Whalen, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder very much care about the society they criticize and its members.

The essays in this volume examine the movement from literary text to embodied practice, which we could term the “inward movement,” and they also examine the movement from the solitary body to the world’s body, which we could call the “outward movement.” Jane Falk’s “Finger Pointing at the Moon: Zen and the Poetry of Philip Whalen” exemplifies the inward movement, which Falk traces through developing patterns in

Whalen's verse. The earlier Zen-inspired writings "can be seen as proof of his avant-garde status and as a way of distancing himself from identities available to mainstream American writers in the 1950s," but the poems that appeared in the 1958 *Chicago Review* reveal Whalen the reader rather than Whalen the practitioner. Significantly, that issue also contained writings by D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Jack Kerouac, as well as Gary Snyder. As Falk demonstrates with reference to Whalen's letters to Ginsberg and Snyder, Whalen hungered to move from a Buddhism that was primarily a matter of clever allusion to one that involved touching "Enlightenment" or the "Real." In his poetry-as-practice, Whalen drew on the ideas associated primarily with Suzuki, such as the notion that "a more evolved understanding of emptiness . . . includes seeing things as they are." Buddhism, then, allowed for a kind of quirky, quotidian realism, one in which the Real, correctly understood, is most efficiently gestured toward by something like a William Carlos Williams poem. For Falk, "Whalen . . . narrows the gap between spirituality and ordinary life, one of Zen's goals."

Falk finds a shift in Whalen's work as a result of his stay in Japan in the late 1960s, at which time, Whalen told David Meltzer, he first began to "sit seriously." But the inward movement is in no sense a movement away from the social and political realities we mean when we refer to "worldliness," as Falk points out in her discussion of "The War Poem for Diane di Prima," which Whalen concludes by saying, "Nobody wants the war only the money/ fights on, alone." The social commentary on a war fought *for* money is at once a generalization about war as a hypostasized greed, acting through people. The poem nudges us away from the idea that the inside and the outside are different, so conditioned is our sense of the world by our inner greed and aggression. Or, as Whalen said to Leslie Scalapino, "You can't say there's something out there. It's all inside." The desire to battle the war itself is, wittily and warmly, converted into a gift of sorts, since the war poem is an offering to Diane di Prima. As Whalen develops as a Zen priest (eventually becoming abbot at the Hartford Street Zendo), his poems become more spare. The Buddhist vocabulary drops away, and Whalen mysteriously writes less and less. Whalen described poetry as a "graph of a mind moving"; Falk finds in Whalen's poems a graph of his mind's motion. In a famous Zen *kōan* that Whalen retells in a poem, two monks argue about whether the flag is moving, or whether the wind is moving. In the *kōan's* punchline, the mind is moving. Readers of Whalen, in thinking through the interrelations between Zen practice and poetry, will need to think more about the quiet of Whalen's later years. Was it evidence of a stilled mind, or is that just a nice way to describe writer's block?

Eric Mortenson describes a different sort of movement in his essay on the Buddhist “stillpoint.” Rather than present the visionary moment uncritically in the writers’ own terms as has been the critical practice to date, Mortenson urges a more critical approach and to that end compares the role of visionary representation in the work of Kerouac and Ginsberg. For Mortenson, these two writers had opposite difficulties that had identical effects. Ginsberg was overly attached to a vision from the past, which arrested his work. Kerouac hungered for a visionary moment in the future, and so his quest for this visionary moment became an end rather than a means. Drawing on the writings of Robert Aitkin and Shunryu Suzuki, Mortenson proposes a vision of “the visionary” in which one temporarily makes contact with one’s deepest mind not to stay in that mindset permanently but rather so as to return to the world with an altered relation to it. According to Michael Mohr, the meditative path through visionary stillpoints is not an escape from quotidian turmoil but, rather, involves “constantly going beyond first awareness of nonduality and aiming at integrating this insight into daily life until no trace of transient exalted states remain.” In this startling formulation, the purpose of meditation is to move *beyond* the stillpoint.

If a non-Buddhist attachment to an essentially Buddhist stillpoint is the paradoxical problem faced by Kerouac and Ginsberg, Gary Snyder’s work has consistently avoided privileging Buddhist vocabularies of transformation in ways that might marginalize other ways of framing the problems of contemporary life. Tom Lavazzi proposes in “Illumination Through the Cracks: The Melting Down of Conventional Socio-Religious Thought and Practice in the Work of Gary Snyder” that we have to be more cognizant of the resourcefulness of writers like Snyder, who drew not only on Buddhism but also Native American shamanism, developing fields like ethnopoetics and performance theory, and other emerging social practices that provided an alternative, oppositional standpoint from which to critique conventional society. All this has been noted by many Snyder critics; Lavazzi focuses on Snyder’s dialogic engagements with various approaches (as does Snyder critic Patrick Murphy), but Lavazzi also brings Snyder’s writings into dialogue with an interlocutor not typically associated with the greenest of poets, namely philosopher Jacques Derrida. Working carefully through Snyder’s incorporation of various “technologies of the sacred” in his work, Lavazzi draws connections between Snyder’s work and Continental theory via the work of deconstructive eco-theologians. As many readers have noted, Snyder’s poems subvert their own status as self-existent texts: “The texts, once we move beyond the idea that the printed page is the *real* text, become collaborations between writer and reader.”

As Snyder demonstrates so beautifully in his descriptions of Chinese landscape paintings of Chinese landscape paintings in the opening poem of *Mountains and Rivers without End*, the seals impressed on the painting are part of the painting: Our comments about the world are part of the world. *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, as a work of art, does not end so long as we continue to talk about it, and literary criticism is our equivalent of the seals printed on the painting. Lavazzi notes how Snyder crosses “French” attempts to “take the Word apart” with Thoreau’s own recommendations regarding a “tawny grammar” and allows readers to see the ways in which Snyder anticipates the post-structuralist affinities of the LANGUAGE poets. Alongside nonanthropocentric eco-theologians and deep ecologists, Snyder mixes disciplines and vocabularies in poem and essay to point a way out of “taxonomic, hierarchic, dualistic thinking.” All of these mixtures and alliances are of course aligned against something—it is not a case of mixing all the cultures of the rainbow together to make an undifferentiated mud—but Snyder draws on the thought of a wide variety of human cultures and disciplines in order to fashion his description of a “practice of the wild.” The idea of Buddhism as a special knowledge of the elect is effectively displaced by the subtle alliances among an array of voices.

The idea that a Buddhist essence of a pure, unconditioned, uninflected sort survives its literary transmission from Asia to America is a surprisingly durable idea, and so one cannot say too quickly that its time has come and gone: the often-orientalist notion of a special access to an ideal way of knowing from an ideal (or idealized) culture is born out of a desire for superiority to others that is not easily quashed, and so the idea continues to reincarnate in poems, stories, essays, and interview. Nevertheless, Jane Augustine’s “The American Poetic Diamond Vehicle: Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman Re-work Vajrayana Buddhism,” in looking carefully at the ways in which Trungpa shaped his teachings for the sake of his students and at the ways poets Ginsberg and Waldman “re-work” Vajrayana reference represent a movement beyond the idea that Buddhism can be the new Puritanism that will displace all the wrong views about the world that hold sway. The eclecticism of Ginsberg’s and Waldman’s poetic songs represents a movement beyond what Heller’s “isolated and estranged” Bohemian vision, giving way not to a “square” Zen in place of a “Beat” Buddhism but rather giving way to a generous inclusion of the world and its objects. Such a taking-into-oneself is certainly one of the more remarkable characteristics of both Ginsberg and Waldman’s poems. The practices of travel, of walking meditation, of Indonesian gamelan, of repetitive and shamanistic speech-poem are set beside Tibetan *mamo* chants and *mantra* practice, as the essay traces the rearrangements of Tibetan Buddhist ritual into

postmodern American poetry: “Waldman’s poem is such a ritual, designed to invoke powers that work to expose, pacify, and transmute the energy of aggression. Her method is pure Vajrayana: use poison as medicine. Fight fire with fire”.

#### WIDENING THE CIRCLE

Perhaps one of the most interesting cultural phenomena of the last quarter-century in America has been the emergence of writers of color who have embraced Buddhism as a source of inspiration for their work, and the final section attends to this further transmission—and transformation—of Buddhist ideas. In describing the transmutation of Buddhism in contemporary America, James William Coleman makes the highly dubious claim that the “new Western Buddhism is overwhelmingly white” (192); nevertheless, as “Widening the Circle: Buddhism and American Writers of Color” shows, the literary influence of Buddhists of color must not be underestimated. Indeed, many of the leading writers of color today, as Charles Johnson points out in his Afterword, have committed themselves to Buddhist practice—including Johnson himself, and many other African Americans who are not artists. John Whalen-Bridge begins this section with his revelatory interview with Maxine Hong Kingston. Beyond the informal and humorous tone of the interview—accurately reflecting Kingston’s own personal charm and charisma—this interview is important because it is the first time Kingston has discussed her Buddhism explicitly. Raised by Confucian parents, Kingston says she first felt a strong connection to Buddhism by reading the Beats. Yet she herself cannot call herself a Buddhist because “it all seems so narrow, even Buddhism.” Presumably, in resisting a too-hasty religious identification, Kingston (in the words of Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*) “makes [her] mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” (*The Woman Warrior* 29). Nevertheless, Whalen-Bridge’s ground-breaking interview will inevitably call for a reexamination of Buddhist themes and traces in *The Woman Warrior*, *Tripmaster Monkey*, and *The Fifth Book of Peace*, among her other works.

If Whalen-Bridge’s interview with Kingston is marked by charm, wit, and jocularly, Hanh Nguyen and R.C. Lutz’s analysis of Lan Cao’s seldom discussed *Monkey Bridge* is redolent with a sense of tragedy, grief, and loss. “A Bridge between Two Worlds: Crossing to America” explores the Buddhist idea of karma in the life of a Vietnamese immigrant, Thanh, as she attempts to adjust to American life after the end of the Vietnam War. Cao’s beautifully lyrical, semi-autobiographical novel is narrated by Mai, Thanh’s daughter, who—partly because of her immersion in American

culture—cannot understand or sympathize with her mother’s mysterious convictions about karma. Nguyen and Lutz demonstrate that Thanh’s conception of karma, grounded both in Buddhist doctrine and Vietnamese folklore and mythology, is extraordinarily complex: at once, it is Thanh’s burden and her liberation. Thanh’s excruciating pain from her memories of Vietnam is compounded by Mai’s facile assumptions about the past, presumably absorbed from her adopted American culture—that the past invariably frees the self to a greater sense of possibilities in the present and future. Mai and the reader both learn that the harsh truth is much different. One of the many strengths of Nguyen and Lutz’s essay is that it will call attention to this remarkable, powerful novel.

The section concludes with Gary Storhoff’s “‘Opening the Hand of Thought’: The Meditative Mind in Charles Johnson’s *Dr. King’s Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*.” Meditation, of course, is central to Buddhism, yet as any author knows, sitting meditation is notoriously difficult to render in a fictional narrative meant to entertain since the character is supposedly not to *do* anything beyond a subjective “letting go” of thought. Yet as Storhoff shows, Johnson finds creative solutions to this artistic problem in his short stories through subtle representation of meditation that reveal the transformative power of meditation in the character’s world. Mark Epstein, a psychoanalyst with experience in Buddhism, has written that “meditation is not world denying; the slowing down that it requires is in service of closer examination of the day to day mind” (3). These stories are definitely not “world-denying”; instead, Johnson’s work is very much in line with Thich Nhat Hahn’s “Engaged Buddhism.” Johnson’s stories in *Dr. King’s Refrigerator*, as Storhoff demonstrates, emphasizes how the meditative mind, while examining day-to-day phenomena, is also capable of transcending the quotidian world to imagine and promote wider political change.

The National Book Award winner Charles Johnson supplies the Afterword for *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*. Even though Johnson has arguably become the leading spokesperson for Buddhism and literature in America today, he has said that his publication of *Turning the Wheel: Essays in Buddhism and Writing* surprised many of his readers and not a few of his friends. His passion for his subjects—Buddhism and literature—are nowhere more evident than in this deeply moving reflection upon his remarkable career. In his far-ranging essay, Johnson considers how he came upon Buddhism as an inspiration for his work and as a ballast for his personal life—how he discovers in writing and in Buddhism, the passion of his life, and finally, how these two intertwine in his achievements throughout his career. As Johnson writes, “So a passion for art based on the Dharma led me to first practice meditation when I was fourteen-years-old; to write the novel *Oxherding Tale* when I was in my twenties; and

to embrace the life of a lay Buddhist, an *upasaka*, in my thirties. And *that* passion segued into the joy that comes from translating works that have meant so much to me for forty years.” As we read Johnson’s Afterword, we realize we are in the hands of a writer who has himself been transformed by his religion, so that the beauty of his world is almost overwhelming to him: “After I complete each new story, essay, or lecture, I marvel at and I am thankful for the strangeness and beauty of a bottomless passion that leads to work across so many related disciplines.” Johnson’s essay is a forceful and eloquent conclusion to a volume that, we hope, will open new paths for discovering Buddhism in American literature.

The constitutive elements of American literary Buddhism include the teachings spread by Asian scholars and teachers such as D.T. Suzuki, Shunryu Suzuki, and Chögyam Trungpa, the incisive essays of American Zen teachers such as Robert Aitken, the work of poet-scholars like Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, the popularization of Buddhist myths and texts by American writers such as Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Anne Waldman, Maxine Hong Kingston, Lan Cao, and Charles Johnson. Very important as well are the descriptions of those students of American culture who have spent years finding the ox in and around the poems and stories offered by these first-contact cultural emissaries. Jonathan Stalling, Yuemin He, Marcus Boon, Michael Heller, Jane Falk, Erik Mortenson, Tom Lavazzi, Jane Augustine, Hahn Nguyen, R.C. Lutz, John Whalen-Bridge, and Gary Storhoff have each, in the face of so many warnings within Buddhist discourse about mere scholasticism and the futility of fingers pointing to the moon, attempted to communicate through words the problems faced by writers and the achievements that have resulted from their struggles. The work of literature is not done, we remember, when the poem is published or even when it has been read. As Eihei Dōgen has written: “only a Buddha and a Buddha can see a Buddha.” (See Takahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, pp. 161–167). The most important values are not individual experiences, the logic might go, but are rather connections between beings.

#### NOTES

1. Brunner complicates but does not contest the idea that “Only poets who had been driven underground were capable of producing interesting work.” Edward Brunner, *Cold War Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), ix.
2. See Pamela Hunt Steinle’s *In Cold Fear* for a detailed overview of the censorship battles surrounding texts such as *Lolita* and *Catcher in the Rye*.
3. John Lardas, like Pamela Steinle, argues that the introduction of the possibility of atomic warfare inspired apocalyptic imaginings, but Lardas finds a

utopian effect. America's fight-or-flight syndrome during the cold war may even have had a religious dimension, argues Lardas: "[s]uch flights, whether toward the safety of backyard bomb shelters or to the 'core of your building,' were not merely retreats from the bomb's deathly radiance. On the contrary, they were acts of immersion—imaginative confrontations with a world enveloped by the shadow of apocalypse and suffused with the absurd rhetoric of civil defense" (4).

4. Buddhism makes a distinction between relative truth (that admits personal identity) and absolute truth (which does not). For a discussion of the "Two Truths" doctrine within Buddhism, see Thich Nhat Hanh, 121–31.

5. Buddhism in Asia has often been affiliated with progressive causes but more often is associated with conservative cultural values, and so the "yab yum" scene in *The Dharma Bums* must be an astonishing moment for Asian readers, who, if my teaching in Singapore is a measure, generalize from this text and see all of American Buddhism as a branch of the Orientalist discourse described by Edward Said. A book such as *The Dharma Bums*, even with Ray Smith's ascetic misgivings, will seem more like an attack on Buddhism than a celebration. In 1999 the National University of Singapore held an American Studies conference at which a documentary made by a Buddhist American writer/filmmaker about American Buddhism was played. One of the speakers in the film was a professor at Naropa University who reported that, during a moment of spiritual crisis, she considered shooting a man. This scene was found to be highly objectionable by a leading Singaporean Buddhist in the audience, who said that Christians in Singapore would use such a film to show how crazy Buddhists are. The open, confessional-inclusive approach to emotional affliction and other worldly problems that American Buddhism has cultivated was, according to the Singaporean Buddhist speaker, entirely out of place in the Singaporean/Asian context. The conference title was "Asia and America at Century's End Cultures of Interdependence"—our concern with interdependence should not obscure the precise ways in which cultures construct themselves out of differences.

6. One could take the "Buddhist defense" of Giorno's work further, as Boon does, by comparing poetic effect with Tantric practice. Paradoxically, Giorno celebrates desire in a way that should make readers more mindful. In doing so, he adapts techniques of tantric Buddhism for what may or may not be recognized as a Buddhistic outcome.

7. Mitchell's song "Refuge of the Road" is about her experience with Trungpa, and one can see her oil portrait of him at <http://www.jonimitchell.com/artwork/view.cfm?id=339> (date of access: June 6, 2006).

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PART I

Literature as Vehicle

*Transmission and Transformation*

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# 1

## The Emptiness of Patterned Flux

*Ernest Fenollosa's Buddhist Essay*

*"The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry"*

JONATHAN STALLING

Ernest Fenollosa, the controversial author of the modernist poetry manifesto, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," arrived in Japan in the early 1880s to lecture on Hegel and Herbert Spencer and found himself at the center of the Meiji's rapid embrace of Western ideas and technologies. Under these unique historical circumstances, Fenollosa (who was nicknamed *daijin sensei* or a "teacher of great men") was surrounded by an elite group of gifted students who, like himself, wanted to find a way to synthesize Eastern and Western philosophy, religion, and art. He also had unprecedented access to Japan's great spiritual and art teachers: He studied painting under Kanô Hôgai 狩野芳崖, the last master of Kano family school of painting (he even became an honorary member of the family school) and studied Buddhism under the direction of Sakurai Keitoku 桜井敬徳, the abbot of the Tendai monastery of Miidera 三井寺. He took his Buddhist vows on September 21, 1885, at Miidera and adopted his Buddhist name, Tei-Shin.<sup>1</sup> In 1886 he was appointed to a newly created government position as Imperial Commissioner of Fine Arts in the Ministry of Culture, or Mombushô. And finally in 1889 he (along with his former students and associates) founded the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts (Tôkyô bijutsu gakkai 東京美術學會) where they began

experimenting with synthesizing Eastern and Western art production and pedagogies.<sup>2</sup>

So when, in 1890, Ernest Fenollosa began his journey back to Boston to take up a new post as the curator of Asian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Art, it should not be a surprise that he conceived of his return as an equally meaningful step toward the bridging of East and West. Soon after this voyage he penned a short letter, presumably to himself, describing his prophetic vision in detail:

1st. First, I must remember that, however much I may sympathize with the past civilizations of the East, I am in this incarnation a man of Western race, and bound to do my part toward the development of Western civilization.

2nd. I must also remember that my career must not be the narrow one of a mere scholar or antiquarian, or a historian who burrows in the past for mere accuracy of fact. . . .

5th. In this broad way of working, there must be no attempt to ignore the first theoretical groundwork. I must demonstrate my right to be a power in the world of philosophical opinion. I must go back to my work on Hegel. I must inform myself on present psychologic progress, and I must bring them together on the basis of Buddhist mysticism. . . .

8th. I should found my theory of art in the very depths of mystical individual human faculty, and in the laws of the sociologic development of history. I should give it the very greatest breadth and scope. And I should make my knowledge of the History of Eastern art, only so much example to enforce my universal precept. . . .

12[th]. . . . Let us above all develope [*sic*] in our ideals the Bodhisattva spirit. Let us depict it in its lofty impersonal forms, as well as in its contemporary human incarnations. Let us glorify all that makes for peace, toleration, human conventions and arbitrations, brotherly love. Let us learn from the East to see these individual and social principles symbolized by every beautiful and significant thing in Nature. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Throughout these goals, but especially in the twelfth, it is clear that Fenollosa's cultural project attempts to capture both the wisdom and compassion of his bodhisattva vows he took under the abbot Sakurai Keitoku of Enjo-ji:

However innumerable the sentient beings, I vow to save them all.

However inexhaustible the passions (klesas), I vow to extinguish them all.

However immeasurable the dharmas, I vow to master them all.

However incomparable the truth of the Buddha, I vow to attain it.

For Fenollosa, this development of the bodhisattva spirit would entail both mastering *dharmas* (Asian religious and philosophical discourses) followed by saving the Western world (the charge of his present incarnation as a Westerner) by integrating these ideals into the very fabric of Western lives.<sup>4</sup> To accomplish his new role as the “prophet of the coming fusion,” Fenollosa, or Tei-Shin, would attempt to integrate his unique Hegelian Buddhism into an immensely influential if largely misunderstood heterocultural poetics.

Tei-Shin was the first Euro-American poet to receive a Buddhist name, but he would soon be joined by a *sangha* (Buddhist community) of American poets ranging from Zenshin Ryufu (Philip Whalen) to Ho-Ka (Armand Schwerner). Even though Ernest Fenollosa was one of the first Westerners to become an ordained Buddhist, his work in poetics has never been read in relation to his Buddhist engagements or practice. This is, of course, not to say that Fenollosa’s essay, “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (from now on CWC), has been ignored with regard to the study of Modernism’s transpacific origins. In the last several decades the text has become ground zero for most East/West studies of American poetry.<sup>5</sup> Yet American scholarship has not paid attention to this essay because of its complex East Asian philosophical framework, but for its errors and the degree to which these errors have misled twentieth-century greats from Ezra Pound and Charles Olson to Jacques Derrida.<sup>6</sup> Sinologists have paid attention to the text because of the enduring popularity and appeal of Fenollosa’s and Pound’s valuations of the visual etymological richness of Chinese characters, correctly pointing out that their valuations are linguistically unsound. Cultural and literary critics have continually returned to the text as the pre-eminent modernist example of cultural misunderstanding, appropriation, and cultural imperialism. Therefore, various fields in both the humanities and social sciences have continually attempted to silence, sideline, and ridicule Fenollosa’s essay as (for the social sciences) illogical, confused, absurd, inconsistent, misguided, misleading, and positivist, derivative, or, perhaps, worst of all inconsequential for literary/cultural studies.

While sinologists like the Yale linguist George A. Kennedy called the CWC “a mass of confusion” based on a “complete misunderstanding” of the Chinese language (Kennedy 443–462),<sup>7</sup> most contemporary literary critics follow the reading of Fenollosa presented in Hugh Kenner’s critical juggernaut *The Pound Era*, where he paints Fenollosa’s poetics as derivative transcendentalist hallucination. By ideogramatically positioning quotes from Fenollosa’s CWC next to Emerson’s essays “The Poet” (1844) and “The Method of Nature” (1841), Kenner claims that “we can collect without trouble a body of propositions indistinguishable in import from

the statements about reality out of which Fenollosa's great *Ars Poetica* is educed" (158).

In an even more dismissive tone Kenner begins by quoting Emerson (who is himself quoting a proverb) "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies . . . must carry out the wealth of the Indies," and then comments "Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853–1908), born in Salem and educated at Harvard, took with him to Japan in 1878 as Professor of Philosophy (Hegel, Herbert Spencer) the treasures of Transcendentalism, and brought with him from Japan on his last journey in 1901 the same Transcendentalism, seen anew in the Chinese Written Character"(158). While Kenner is right to note the influence of Emerson's thinking on the CWC, the idea that Fenollosa's thinking never moved past his Harvard education even after two decades of intensive study and immersion in East Asian art, politics, literature, and philosophy seems harsh. By taking Kenner's convenient dismissal to heart, however, scholars of early-American modernism (and even East–West studies) continue to deny not only Fenollosa the credit for his rich heterocultural poetics, but also many important transpacific elements of early American Modernism itself.

The most recent interpretive angle on Fenollosa's ideogrammic error comes from literary critics like Robert Kern who have pointed to Fenollosa's reading of Chinese characters as an Orientalist imposition à la Edward Said. In Kern's trendsetting work, *Orientalism, Modernism and the American Poem*, he argues that Fenollosa's CWC continues to represent "the recurrent nature of the role that Chinese seems to play in Western linguistic projects." He continues, "What I have in mind here specifically is the 'Adamic' doctrine that language, in poetry and other modes of discourse as well, can achieve a penetration to the truth or essences of things" (7). Therefore, Kern argues that Fenollosa's idealization of Chinese reflects the uniquely Western search (grounded in a certain reading of Emersonian Transcendentalism inherited by American poetics) for the Adamic language of absolute mimesis. At first glance Fenollosa's work may provide Saidian criticism with a seemingly perfect candidate, but Said's critical frames cannot be applied with a broad brush at the expense of historically specific readings capable of reading the heterocultural elements that work like Fenollosa's offers us. After all, this framing takes Kern to his logical conclusion, "all of these writers, regardless of their knowledge (or lack of it) of Chinese, are motivated by a concept of linguistic possibility that is entirely Western" (7). It is convenient for scholars who do not have a background in Asian philosophy, religion, language, or poetics like Kern and Kenner, to assert that Fenollosa's poetics is "entirely western" for the simple fact that this is all they can see at play in his work. Yet this reading obfuscates the complex

cultural and historical conditions that give rise to what Yunte Huang calls the “transpacific displacement” at the very foundation of American Modernism.<sup>8</sup> Reread in its wider cultural/historical context, the CWC reveals a startlingly rich heterocultural poetics, characterized by a complex weave of Western philosophy and a Buddhist epistemology as unique then as it remains today.

So why have scholars never addressed Fenollosa’s Asian religious/philosophical study and practice in their interpretation of his work? The answer is complex. One of the most important factors is the simple fact that we have come to this essay through the Modernist giant, Ezra Pound. It is only natural that Fenollosa’s essay would be largely read through the prism of Pound’s own reading, since he edited, published, popularized, and continually defended the essay throughout his long career. Yet I hope to show that Pound’s reading of the essay (which has been accepted as an uncontested norm by literary criticism) lies in stark contrast to Fenollosa’s original essay both aesthetically and philosophically. After historically and culturally contextualizing the original essay within Fenollosa’s complex heterocultural project, it is difficult to imagine two poetic practices more dissimilar than Fenollosa’s and Pound’s. It is not surprising that Pound, who aligned himself with (his positivist reading of) Confucianism, reserved a special distaste for Buddhists whom he derogatorily referred to as “Bhud-foés.” Pound writes in Canto 98, “And as for these Bhud-foés/ They provide no mental means for/ Running an empire, nor do Taoists/ With their internal and external pills—is it external? The gold pill?—to preserve them from physical death” (687).

While leaving the essay’s basic Eastern-philosophy-inspired poetics intact, Pound actively deletes many of the original essay’s more Buddhist rhetoric, including references to Kegon-(華嚴 Huayan)-inspired images of “Indra’s Net” (*jiji muge* 事事無礙) “interpenetrating overtones,” “intermingling tones,” and the like.<sup>9</sup> Pound regularly deletes the more verbose sentences or passages marked by what Fenollosa would call “Buddhist colour” for reasons that will be clear to any reader of Pound’s work. Pound cut sections where Fenollosa expounds on the blending of “colours of sympathetic tones of orchestral instruments, lost in the harmony of their chord,” and passages such as “In painting, great colour beauty springs not from the main colour masses, but from the refined modifications or overtones which each throws into the other, just as tints are etherealized in a flower by reflection from petal to petal.”<sup>10</sup> Such passages, for Pound, belonged in flowery “Bhud-foé” sutras, not Modernist manifestos.

As I will try to show, for Pound to take Fenollosa’s essay as a modernist “ars poetica,” he had to assume that Fenollosa was arguing for a “direct

treatment of the thing,” and that Western logic prevents one from seeing that things like “cherry trees” (direct treatment of the thing) are what is real. Yet Fenollosa’s Kegon and Tendai epistemology teaches us to see Fenollosa’s example as implying that *things are unreal*, but their interplay and interaction *is*. Unlike Fenollosa, Pound believes Chinese characters embody their signifieds in a perfect mimesis. In his *ABC of Reading* Pound writes, “The Chinese ideogram does not try to be a picture of a sound, . . . but is still a picture of a thing. . . . It *means* the thing” (19–23). Pound is, of course, getting this idea from *his* reading of Fenollosa, but as Pound and subsequent Pound/Fenollosa scholars have generally neglected to point out, Fenollosa never argues that characters are pictures of things, but instead says they are snapshots of natural processes, or interpenetrating bundles, a distinction with very important philosophical implications.

The profound philosophical differences between Pound’s desire for precise presentations of things and Fenollosa’s valuation of the interrelations within and between clearly aggregative things destabilizes the very category of independent things and leads to two very distinct readings of the CWC. When read through Pound’s selective interpretation, the CWC does appear to embody the positivist notions contemporary critics charge it with. Yet what existing readings of Fenollosa’s text fail to consider is that Pound’s own particularly positivist reading of Confucian hermeneutics brings this dream of a mimetic language to Fenollosa’s text, while the text itself is a powerful critique of what Fenollosa understands as the positivist tendencies of both Western logic and Confucian hermeneutics. As we will see, it is the ideogram’s aggregative nature, which (when understood through the Tendai 天台 Buddhist school to which he belonged) offered Fenollosa a language incapable of hypostatization, and therefore a means to deal with the positivism of Western logic and contemporary Confucianism, which he saw as the principle catalyst for cultural degeneration and tyranny in the modern world.

#### FENOLLOSA’S “NEW BUDDHISM” AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICS

In addition to Ezra Pound’s heavy editorial presence, the second and perhaps more important reason that scholars have not addressed Fenollosa’s Buddhism rests within the complex historical conditions of the Buddhism at play in Fenollosa’s work. Unlike later poets like Gary Snyder or Philip Whalen, who studied forms of Zen still popular today, Fenollosa became deeply engaged in a historically specific Japanese revival and reconstruction of Buddhism known as *shin bukkyo* 新佛教 or New Buddhism, a

nationalistic Buddhist movement deeply influenced by Social Darwinism and Hegelian philosophy. Simply put, Fenollosa's Buddhism was a product of his unique time and place, and could not be easily recognized or reconstructed by later readers.

Fenollosa begins the CWC by proclaiming that "This twentieth century not only turns a new page in the Book of the World, but opens another and a startling Chapter" (3). For Fenollosa, this "startling chapter" promised a coming fusion between the East and West. However, he argues that such a fusion could only take place between equals, and since "the people of Continental Europe fear the possibilities of selfhood in the East" and will try to "crush her, before her best powers shall have time to ripen,"<sup>11</sup> much of his writing (including the CWC) argues that America should join forces with Japan (and often Britain) to intervene on "China's behalf." It was Fenollosa's belief (and the belief of many Japanese elites including his two most prominent students Ernyō Inoue and Kakuzo Okakura) that China should submit to the protection and guidance of Japan, since Japan's relative isolation had preserved the most evolved form of Chinese culture (Tang and Song Buddhism, Daoism, and cosmological Confucianism).

According to Fenollosa and his Meiji circle, if China were to find her selfhood again, she would have to be both reinvigorated and protected by her Eastern neighbor, for not only was Japan's (Buddhist) culture the entelechy of Chinese civilization, but Japan had acquired the military and economic power necessary to fight off European encroachments that were attempting to "chain" China "in slavery to some Western form of Despotism."<sup>12</sup> For Fenollosa, then, the European spheres of influence were the primary stumbling blocks to the coming era of "East West fusion" since these threatened to permanently partition China into separate colonies similar to those established in Africa.

This introduction to the CWC is not really a plea for sympathy, but a warning to the West, for "Strange as it may seem," Fenollosa says, "the future of Anglo Saxon supremacy in the world" is tied to "the future of that East." He continues, "The Chinese Problem, alone, is so vast that it dominates the world and forces that supreme historical crisis which has been waiting for centuries. No nation can afford to ignore it; we in America least of all. We must face it across the Pacific, and master it—or it will master us" (CWC 3–4). This talk of mastery may appear to contradict Fenollosa's own plea to fuse with rather than oppress China ("Coming Fusion" 116), but one must be careful to not misidentify the antecedent to the pronoun "it" found in this last line. This "it" refers not "Chinese Culture" or even "China" itself, but to the crisis resulting from European colonialism.

Read in the wider context of Fenollosa's writing, this warning is twofold. First, in a move that preempts current concerns about the "rise of China,"<sup>13</sup> Fenollosa argues that the combination of China's natural resources and industrial potential will transform it into the world's largest industrial power by the end of the twentieth century, and if America wants to be China's partner in the coming Pacific era, it must join with Japan and integrate itself with China politically, economically, and culturally before this takes place ("Coming Fusion" 116). The second layer of this warning comes later on in the CWC (and can be found elsewhere in Fenollosa's writing),<sup>14</sup> where Fenollosa warns his readers that the thin stagnant formalism of medieval logic has weakened Western languages (and by extension thought) and is leading the West down a path of cultural degeneracy. Cultural evolution for both China and the West can only come, according to Fenollosa, through the integration of Eastern philosophy and Western science.<sup>15</sup>

For Fenollosa, the coming synthesis prophesied in his epic poem *East and West* appeared shockingly real at the turn of the twentieth century, with the annexation of the Philippines at the end of the Spanish American War, and with political reforms in China that hinted, however briefly, at a period of Westernization and reconstruction similar to the Meiji.<sup>16</sup> For Fenollosa, the annexation of the Philippines was the first step toward America's permanent entrance into China ushering in a peaceful era of East/West cultural fusion. Fenollosa's essay "The Coming Fusion of East and West," like the CWC, addressed an American audience bitterly divided by the annexation of the Philippines. Most of the public debate was dominated by white supremacist fears of "swarms" of "Asiatic races" threatening to engulf America and lead to "racial degeneration."<sup>17</sup> Fenollosa, on the other hand, entered this debate from the opposite pole, as he regarded the annexation as "a drama more sudden and mighty than the Macedonian's transport of Greece to India. And if that former contact of East and West resulted in a union of cultures, from which sprang modern Europe, so must this latter-day meeting issue in a world-wide fusion, from which shall arise a broader manhood" ("Coming Fusion" 116). In effect, Fenollosa uses Social Darwinist terms but inverts their normative use-values by arguing for amalgamation rather than against it, so that humanity "will be wonderfully enlarged" ("Coming Fusion" 116). And unlike President McKinley, who felt it was America's "Christian burden" to govern "those incapable of self governance,"<sup>18</sup> Fenollosa's desire for fusion did not spring from a Christian burden, but was decidedly aligned with the New Buddhist rhetoric circulating in Fenollosa's Japanese social and professional network (which sought to couch Japanese colonial expansion in terms of Buddhist benevolence and East/West fusion). It was this particular late Meiji admixture

of Social Darwinism, Hegelianism, and Buddhism that gave birth to the geopolitical orientation of Fenollosa's prophetic calling as well. And while one wonders what Fenollosa might have thought about Japan's ability to lead Asia toward a Buddhist rebirth after the "rape of Nanking," or Japan's brutal colonial legacy in Korea and elsewhere (not to mention the U.S. fitness for stewardship after firebombing residential Tokyo or the atomic bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima), a fair treatment of this issue must include the ways in which the militarism of the late 1920s and 1930s imbued religion and culture with new and more jingoistic meanings.

#### BUDDHISM, TENDAI PHILOSOPHY, AND THE CWC

While it is obvious that Fenollosa's own geopolitics reflect a shared conflation of ideology and philosophy/religion with the New Buddhist movement, this does not mean that his Buddhism can be reduced to its political dimensions. After all, Fenollosa received a more orthodox Tendai training before (and after) his reception into the *sangha* in 1885. Central to his training would have been a familiarization with Tendai's central teaching of the "middle way" or "threefold truths": 1) all things are empty (of inherent existence); 2) all things have a provisional/ interrelated reality; and 3) all things are both empty of ultimate reality, and provisionally real at the same time (Zhiyi 智顛, 538–97). Expounding a verse from Nāgārjuna's *Madhyamaka-kārikās*, Zhiyi held that an object (say a table) does not exist autonomously without causes and conditions and is therefore said to be empty of absolute existence (first proposition); but it is not therefore true that there are no such things as tables. Such things are perceptible and can be designated in language, so they have a provisional existence (second proposition). But neither the empty nor the provisional truth about the table fully captures its reality: it is both provisional and empty, and neither (merely) provisional nor (merely) empty (third proposition). The reality of the mean is a reconciliation of the two extremes of nihilism and materialism, the "perfect way" 圓道.<sup>19</sup>

There is another reason to believe that Tendai's "Middle Way" would have held a particularly strong attraction for Fenollosa. Fenollosa was a firm advocate of Hegel's dialectical logic. Fenollosa's student Enryō Inoue 井上圓了 (1858–1919), who studied Hegel and other Western philosophers under him at Tokyo University, later came to be the leading voice of Buddhist reform in late Meiji by attempting to reconcile Buddhist philosophy with Hegelianism. Inoue argued that the Tendai teaching of the Middle Way both anticipates and goes beyond the highest ideals of Western philosophy. In Inoue's *shin bukkyo* manifesto *bukkyo katsuron joron* 佛教活論序論,<sup>20</sup>

he organizes Western philosophy by means of a simplified version of the Hegelian dialectic, grouping the entire work of individual philosophers or whole schools into threes with each philosopher (or school) occupying the position of thesis, antithesis, or synthesis. In the end, each historical synthesis still comes up incomplete and, therefore, will continue *ad infinitum*.<sup>21</sup> Inoue argues that:

The so-called Middle Way is not being nor is it emptiness; it is both being and emptiness, and materialism and idealism are reconciled within it. It is a Middle Way that simultaneously embraces subjectivity and objectivity. It is a Middle Way that integrates experience and nature . . . within the Middle Way, all the ancient theories meet . . . as a theory it lacks nothing . . . It is the great ocean of thought and the fountainhead of philosophy.<sup>22</sup>

Given the convenient tripartite structure of both Hegelian and Tendai philosophy, it is not surprising that Fenollosa would also subscribe to a vision of a Hegelian (Tendai) Buddhism. In an essay entitled “Remarks on Japanese Art in General” Fenollosa writes, “[Supplemented] by Western Science, and the theory of Western Synthetic Logic [Hegel], it [Buddhism] can be made adequate to express the highest needs of intellectual life and to satisfy the highest claims of Pure Reason, and that, without ceasing to remain essentially Buddhism” (8).<sup>23</sup> Citing personal notebooks dating to the year of Fenollosa’s return to Japan (1896), Fenollosa’s biographer, Lawrence Chisolm, writes, “More than ever Buddhism seemed a key to all speculations. Tendai Buddhism offered a truly synthetic philosophy with all the color and texture which Hegel lacked.”<sup>24</sup> Fenollosa saw the combination of Mahayana Buddhism and dialectical logic as the telos of the current age of history.

Tendai’s dehypostatization of conventional reality, dehypostatization being the habit of Western philosophy to posit concrete realities in or behind words, among other investments, led Fenollosa to disagree with the mavericks of Western Buddhology, Rhys Davids and Max Müller, with their positivist claims to textual authority.<sup>25</sup> Both Davids and Müller argued that the only authentic Buddhism existed in the Pali texts, since these texts could be traced back to the historical Buddha. Believing, then, that the Western scholarly exegesis of the original texts provided the only authentic knowledge of Buddhism, they argued that all subsequent Mahayana Buddhism merely amounted to degenerate cultural accretions and local superstitions. While this argument gave Orientalists greater authority over Buddhism than its (then) present practitioners held, Fenollosa chose to anchor his claims to those made by its (then) present-day practitioners (in Japan) rather than the Pali texts.

Relying on the Social Darwinist supports deployed by Japanese Buddhists of the period, such as Inoue and the Japanese delegates who attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Fenollosa contested both Christian and Western Buddhological claims to textual authority by labeling the older Theravada tradition (the branch of Buddhism associated with the Pali) a static tradition lacking the growth and vitality of Mahayana practice. In effect, the Japanese Buddhists deployed Social Darwinist claims as a means of reclaiming Buddhism as a progressive and dynamic form of Asian Modernity rather than a set of ancient texts.<sup>26</sup> In his massive study, *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, Fenollosa writes, “The great truth that they [Western Buddhologists] forget is that Buddhism, like Christianity . . . has been an evolutionary religion, never content with old formalisms, but, filled with spiritual ardour, continually re-adapting itself to the needs of the human nature with which it finds itself in contact” (*Epochs* 29). So while the New Buddhists could not escape Western knowledge claims by allowing Eurocentric discourses to frame the very terms of their dissent, this hybrid idiom would likely not have disturbed Fenollosa, whose appropriation of New Buddhist rhetoric granted him an unusual sense of authority, enabling him to contest established Western Orientalist claims without having to question his overarching Eurocentric investments.

While it is important to explore the imperialist and essentializing elements of Fenollosa’s Buddhist positioning, which helps one understand the imperialist tone of the opening paragraphs of the CWC, one must return to the core Tendai tripartite formulation of the Middle Way espoused by Inoue to address the Buddhist thought in the CWC itself. Read in the context of Fenollosa’s Tendai epistemology, the central argument is not the perfect isomorphism of signifier and signified, which is one of the most important elements of Pound’s reading of the essay, but that that Western languages and logic have mistaken accuracy for truth, taxonomy for knowledge, and abstraction for reality.

#### BUDDHIST “CHINESE WRITTEN CHARACTER AS A MEDIUM FOR POETRY”

For Fenollosa, one must turn to the openness of a language infused by interrelation and conditionality rather than one closed by substances and identities. His essay offers an example of a language and poetic tradition that, for him anyhow, avoids the positivist pitfalls of Western logic by foregrounding its ultimate emptiness while offering conventional truths (and beauty) at the same time. For Fenollosa, many characters appear as

snapshots of their dependent co-origination, a bundle not only arising from these aggregates, but also further prone to undetermined meanings when syntactically set adrift with other such aggregated bundles. Using these snapshots of dependently originating bundles, a poet, for Fenollosa, can actually mimic nature's own infinitely interpenetrating flux while at the same time establishing conventional truths in beautiful harmonies within the patterns of language and nature itself.

Fenollosa begins his assault on the logical categorization of language and thought with a challenge to Western notions of syntactic completeness. He gives two Western definitions of syntactic completion: "a sentence [that] expresses a 'complete thought'" or one that achieves its completion through a simple "union of subject and predicate." So, therefore, the kind of completeness demonstrated by the "practical completeness" of, say, simple interjections like "Hi there," or "Scat!" "are only conventionally complete" since "no full sentence really completes a thought" (CWC 11). It is important to draw attention to Fenollosa's distinction between conventional completeness represented in what he defines as natural syntax and any notion of ultimate completion, which he argues is not possible in language of any kind, for it is this very distinction between conventional and ultimate truth that lies at the center of Tendai's Middle Path.

Fenollosa gives an example of a natural sentence, Man sees horse, as a model of conventional completeness, yet he shows how it falls short of any ultimate completion since "The man who sees and the horse which is seen will not stand still. The man was planning a ride before he looked. The horse kicked when the man tried to catch him." He continues, "The truth is that acts are successive, even continuous; one causes or passes into another. And though we may string ever so many clauses into a single, compound sentence, motion leaks everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire." He concludes that "All processes in nature are inter-related; and thus there could be no complete sentence (according to this definition) save one which it would take all time to pronounce" (CWC 11). Throughout Fenollosa's analysis one can detect both the spatially oriented Kegon 華嚴 definition of emptiness (all things are empty of autonomous completeness because all things are interrelated), and the more temporal-oriented Madhyamika definition of emptiness ("one cause passing into another" or *pratitya-samutpāda* or dependent arising) to communicate the merely conventional completeness of syntax.<sup>27</sup>

The influence of Kegon along with that of Tendai Buddhism on Fenollosa's thinking is present from early on. In an earlier lecture, Fenollosa deploys an even more powerful Buddhist articulation of his argument by comparing static *things* to temporary waves on the surface of a deep, still sea:

If we take an instantaneous photograph of the sea in motion, we may fix the momentary form of a wave, and call it a thing; yet it was only an incessant vibration of water. So other things more things, apparently more stable, are only large vibrations of living substance; and when we trace them to their origin and decay, they are seen to be only parts of something else. And these essential processes of nature are not simple; there are waves upon waves, process below processes, systems within systems;—and apparently so on forever. (“Theory of Literature” 156)

In this passage Fenollosa is invoking a common Buddhist metaphor by comparing transience (conventional or empty phenomena) to waves, and absolute emptiness to the sea. The metaphor’s origin likely stems from the Sanskrit word *paramita*, which means “having arrived at the other shore,” and is often explained as “being apart from coming into being and ceasing to be.” For before one is released from attachment, coming into being and ceasing to be “arise like waves on water.”<sup>28</sup> And to transcend the states of existence, which would release one from coming into being or ceasing to be, entails a shift in perception likened to the freely flowing water rather than its surface waves.<sup>29</sup> But Fenollosa’s discussion of “waves upon waves, processes below processes, and systems within systems” specifically invokes Kegon epistemology (and by extension aesthetics).

The Kegon (*Huayan*) school chose the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, Chinese *Huayan jing* 華嚴經<sup>30</sup> for its foundation, which immediately located this school in distinct epistemological position vis-à-vis all previous schools, for the *Avatamsaka* describes the historical Buddha’s moment of awakening itself, which means an epistemology based upon this sutra begins from a *nirvanic* rather than *samsaric* perspective (which is to say it discusses reality from the perspective of the Buddha enlightened epistemology rather than a worldly one). The nirvanic perspective of the Huayan School deploys the preexisting Chinese terms, *shi* (事 things) and *li* (理 principle), to propose a new model of emptiness derived in part from Chinese categories of thought. Building upon the earlier thought of the Tendai school, the Huayan school argued that there were multiple ways of seeing the world: on the first level of consciousness people just focus on *shi* things, as if they were autonomous entities; on the second level people sought to understand the principle of *li* behind the manifestations of *shi*; the third level showed that *li* and *shi* interpenetrated one another (*li shi wu ai* 理事無礙); while the fourth (and final) level recognizes the complete interpenetration all things (*shishi wu'ai* 事事無礙), where every-*shi* interpenetrates every other *shi*. This vast web of interpenetration is often referred to by the metaphor of *Indra’s net*, which is envisaged as a vast net of interconnections

where every intersection of every causal connection (figured here as horizontal and vertical threads) one finds a jewel reflecting every other jewel in the net. By moving beyond the dehypostatizing method of dependent arising to posit the positive existence of this interconnected totality, the Huayan school established a new ontological foundation for emptiness: the net itself. Yet unlike Tendai's "Middle Path," Kegon's "net" granted Fenollosa a more visual and vivid theory of emptiness capable of embodying both his epistemological and aesthetic concerns.

Returning now to the CWC, Fenollosa follows his critique of syntactic completeness by challenging what he sees as the next linguistic obstacle to the "Middle Path": semantic completeness. For Fenollosa, nouns represent the abstracted principle of stasis, isolation, and individual semantic autonomy. He writes, "A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots" (CWC 10). Later he continues, "To get a tolerably concrete noun, we have to leave behind the verb and adjective roots, and light upon a thing arbitrarily cut off from its power of action, say 'the sun' or 'the moon.'" Yet he argues that "there is nothing in nature so cut off, and therefore this nounizing is itself an abstraction" (CWC 17). Finally, he continues, "Fancy picking up a man and telling him that he is a noun, a dead thing rather than a bundle of functions!" (CWC 17). In this case, Fenollosa argues that "words" as such, and especially "nouns" in particular, are capable of deluding their users into believing they are semantically stable and complete unto themselves (*shi*/things). By following the same method of destabilization used to undermine syntactic completeness (interdependent and causal origination), Fenollosa argues that nouns are just as empty of autonomous completeness as sentences are.

Fenollosa moves on to discuss the shortcomings of adjectival categories in a manner highly reminiscent of his Buddhist "wave" metaphor. He argues that adjectives are merely derivations of processes: "Green is only a certain rapidity of vibration, hardness a degree of tenseness in cohering" (CWC 19). In this manner Fenollosa continues to show how each grammatical convention cannot prevent motion from leaking "everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire." Since he asserts that "isolated thing[s] do not exist in nature," his essay argues that "The verb must be the primary fact of nature, since motion and change are all that we can recognize in her" (CWC 19), and, concordantly, any poetics based upon the operations of nature will necessarily be one that privileges transitive verbs over nouns and "relations over things" or the net over individual *shi* (CWC 22). After

nouns, therefore, Fenollosa finds value in the various parts of speech to the extent to which they foreground the interrelated (and thus ultimately incomplete/empty) nature of signification, their transience, or as Fenollosa has it, transitive-ness. Should it be surprising that Fenollosa values transitive verbs above all other parts of speech? After all, the Buddhist valuation of the “transient” and Fenollosa’s “transitive” are but present and past participles of the same Latin word *trānsire*, *to go over* (OED).

After moving through the parts of speech, Fenollosa embarks on his most critical and lengthy attack on logical categories and their linguistic conventions. He writes:

According to . . . European logic thought is a kind of brickyard. It is baked into little hard units or concepts. These are piled in rows according to size and then labeled with words for future use. This use consists in picking out a few bricks, each by its convenient label, and sticking them together into a sort of wall called a sentence by the use either of white mortar for the positive copula ‘is,’ or of black mortar for the negative copula ‘is not’ (CWC 25–26).

By moving from grammar proper to the logic behind English grammar’s “movement toward” taxonomical knowledge as its ultimate function, Fenollosa hopes to reveal the link between language and the limitation of thought and knowledge itself.

In an earlier draft of the CWC, Fenollosa goes on to explain why logic fails as a foundation for ultimate knowledge since it “purchases its sharpness by its thinness. Its accuracy by its isolation.” He continues, “Now things, a notion, are not isolated. Their processes are not simple. Their Meanings are not shredded . . . life is infinite and all at once. The truth of things lies not in their abstraction, but in some organic law which governs their complex interrelations.” Fenollosa thus concludes that “The sheer loss and weakness of this [logical] method” is “apparent and flagrant,” since “such logic cannot deal with any kind of interaction or with any multiplicity of function.”<sup>31</sup> As I mentioned in the first section, Fenollosa sees these weaknesses as the root of cultural degeneracy, to which, precisely, the integration of Eastern philosophy into the Western mind was to provide the cure. For Fenollosa, then, the kinds of truths offered by taxonomical and positivist structures of knowledge can only address conventional needs but are not suited for serious philosophical study, let alone poetry and art. Yet he, like others on Tendai’s middle path, sees value in language’s practical applications. For Fenollosa, Chinese offers its users a perfect middle path, by negating the idea of autonomous things/words (all can be shown to be composites and

not “real” unities), while still offering its users a practical language capable of communicating conventional truths at the same time.

FENOLLOSA AS BUDDHIST  
LITERARY ANTECEDENT

It is my hope that by rereading the CWC within the context of Fenollosa’s wider writing, this chapter will begin a process of rethinking not only Fenollosa’s place in the birth and evolution of American modernist poetics, but in the place of Buddhist epistemology as well.<sup>32</sup> While Pound succeeded in eliminating most of Fenollosa’s explicit Buddhist language and the second half of the essay that begins to present Fenollosa’s valuation of Chinese correlative poetics as a possible foundation for Western poetry, the theoretical and aesthetic gist or essence of these heterocultural elements remain a vital part of the published version. It would not be irresponsible to argue, then, that Pound’s shift from the more static image to the more dynamic vortex was influenced in part, not just by the CWC, but by Kegon notions of interpenetrating phenomena (Ja: jijimuge) and Tendai notions of dependent arising (Pratityasamutpada) as well, even if any explicit cultural ties to these concepts have been severed. And while the dominating call for a unified harmonious interpenetration of overtones cannot claim a significant impact on the Modernist, disjunctive poetic forms inspired by Pound’s ideogrammic method, the Buddhist epistemological arguments that underlie Fenollosa’s theory of aggregative bundles, and nonsyntactic completeness certainly can. It is my hope that my rereading of the CWC will not pronounce the text “read,” but instead problematize the existing predetermined frames that erase its heterocultural aggregates so that new and more challenging readings of the CWC can emerge in the future.<sup>33</sup>

NOTES

1. On a monument to Fenollosa at the temple Enjo-ji, we read the following inscription: “Professor Fenollosa was a great believer in the Buddhist religion. After long study he became a convert to it, and he received baptism from the abbot Sakurai Keitoku of Enjo-ji. His Buddhist name is Tei-Shin.” See “Japan’s Tribute to Fenollosa” *Boston Evening* September 21, 1920.

2. This school prepared the Japanese art exhibit at the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893 and also influenced the particular “New Buddhism” or “Eastern Buddhism” presented at the World’s Parliament of Religions held at the fair. I will discuss these points at a later time.

3. "My position in America; a manifest of mission," manuscript dated 1 May 1891. Harvard University, Houghton Library, bMS. Am. 1759.2, item 60, described in Murakata, *The Ernest F. Fenollosa Papers*, 3:48. Spelling as in original.

4. *Ibid.*, 1.

5. See Eric Hayot's "Critical Dreams." There is an updated version of this essay in Hayot, *Chinese Dreams*.

6. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 92. Derrida's idea of a "graphic, non-logocentric" ideogram has come under fire from critics like Rey Chow. Fore-shadowing these criticisms Spivak writes in her translator's preface that, "the East is never seriously studied or deconstructed in the Derridean text." As if a contagion, those who have drawn from the CWC have been cited for perpetuating the same essentializing tendencies of the original (without asking whether such readings have been essentialized readings of the CWC).

7. For a contemporaneous deflation of the pictographic tendencies of Florence Ayscough, see Peter A. Boodberg, "On Fishing Snow," in *Selected Works of Peter Boodberg*, p. 182. On the fortunes of the concept of "ideography" in relation to Chinese, see Saussy, "The Prestige of Writing," *Great Walls of Discourse*, pp. 34–74. On "The Seafarer," the last poem in *Cathay*, see Robinson, "The Might of the North."

8. Huang defines "transpacific displacement" as "a historical process of textual migration of cultural meanings, meanings that include linguistic traits, poetics, philosophical ideas, myths, stories, and so on." See Huang p. 3.

9. While Fenollosa did not officially study Kegon Buddhism with a Kegon priest or scholar, he would have been familiar with "Indra's net" from the writing of his student and friend Kakuzo Okakura, who discusses this metaphor in his 1903 book *Ideals of the East*. Gratitude to Haun Saussy for this reference.

10. Ernest Fenollosa, "E.F.F. The Chinese Written Language as a Medium for Poetry," Oct 1909

(Yale University, Beinecke Library, Ezra Pound Papers, box 101, folder 4248. YCAL MSS 43, B101 F4248). Copyright 1997 by Mary de Rachewiltz and Omar Pound, used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation) 54.

11. Fenollosa, "E.F.F. The Chinese Written Language as a Medium for Poetry," Oct 1909

(Yale University, Beinecke Library, Ezra Pound Papers, box 101, folder 4248. YCAL MSS 43, B101 F4248) 1. Ezra Pound deleted the paragraph from which this quote was taken.

12. Fenollosa, "The Coming Fusion of East and West," (*Harper's New Monthly Magazine* December 1898) 115–122.

13. Samuel Huntington. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*.

14. See "Analysis and Synthesis" (Houghton Library BMS 1759.2 [50]), "Idealism and Realism" (Houghton library bMS Am 1759.2 [36]), and "Preliminary Lectures on The Theory of Literature," *The Ernest F. Fenollosa Papers*: 135–170.

15. Paul Carus also promoted this view. See Thomas Tweed 60–68. While Fenollosa held Western science as its most valuable asset to a global culture, he still viewed it with significant ambivalence.

16. Kang Yuwei (1858–1927) argued that China should imitate Meiji Japan in its program of reform including the adoption of a constitutional government, but a coup d'état returned authority to the conservative administrators led by the Empress Dowager.

17. Samuel Gompers, “Imperialism—its Dangers and Wrongs,” in *Republic or Empire? The Philippine Question*. Figures like David Starr Jordan, founder of Stanford University, among many others, argued against annexation for fear of race mixing.

18. See Stuart Miller, *Benevolent Assimilation*.

19. See Soothill and Hodous 398. For more on Tian Tai, see Swanson, Paul L. *Foundations of T'ien-T'ai Philosophy: The Flowering of The Two Truths in Chinese Buddhism*. Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press 1989.

20. Inoue, Enryō. *Bukkyo katsuron joron*. Tokyo: testusgaku shoin, 1887. Reproduced in *Meiji bunka zenshu*, Vol. 9, *Shukyo*, 377–416. Tokyo: Toyo University, 1954. An English translation can be found in the appendix of Staggs 398. Also see Staggs' essay “Defend the Nation and Love the Truth.”

21. The dialectical method argues that historical process or progress of the “spirit's” movement toward self-consciousness and freedom, manifests as a dialectic tension as a result of mankind's limitations at each phase of history. This area of Hegel's thought has often been reduced to a dialectical relationship of the categories of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis. An idea contains a form of incompleteness that gives rise to the antithesis, a conflicting idea, and a third point of view, a synthesis, arises from this conflict. This synthesis overcomes the conflict by reconciling the truths contained in the thesis and antithesis at a higher level, but the synthesis, which is a new thesis, generates a new antithesis, and the process continues until truth is arrived, which Inoue claims to have found in the Tendai “middle path.”

22. Enryō Inoue, *Bukkyo katsuron joron*, 398. Inoue's “revelation that Buddhism's ‘middle way’ was superior to Western religion and philosophy took place in 1885, the same year that he graduated from Tokyo University, and the same year that Fenollosa took Buddhist Ordination. Fenollosa, who took his ordination in this year would have lent great support to Inoue's thesis that all Western philosophers would logically convert to Buddhism once properly introduced to Japanese Mahayana. On the other hand, Inoue's claim that Tendai doctrines were superior to all Western religion and philosophy would also have bequeathed Fenollosa a unique status among both his Asian and Western peers.

23. Fenollosa, “Remarks on Japanese Art in General” 8.

24. Chisolm, *Fenollosa*, 131. Chisolm is paraphrasing personal notes housed in the Houghton collection at Harvard University (MMF MSS, No. 7, Oct. 18, 1896).

25. For more about Rhys Davis and the Pali Text Society and Colonialism, see Philip C. Almond.

26. For a discussion on how both the Buddhist and Christian delegates to the exhibition deployed Social Darwinism, see Snodgrass 2, 16, 20–21, 47, 61, 80.

27. For an excellent discussion of *pratītya-samutpāda* (Pali: *praticca-samutpada*) see Garfield. For a discussion of *Indra's Net* and the Avatāmsaka / Huayan / Kegon ("Flower Garland") school/sutra, see *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, trans. Cleary.

28. Whalen Lai makes this point in "Ch'an Metaphors: Waves, Water, Mirror, Lamp."

29. This metaphor can be found in the *Platform Sutra*, and Hakuin's (1689–1796) commentary on the *Heart Sutra* among many other places. The Critical Buddhism movement in Japan during the late 1980s cited this metaphor as a prime example of "non-Buddhist" monism common to most contemporary Japanese Buddhism. See Hakamaya Noriaki, "Critical Philosophy versus Topical Philosophy" in *Pruning the Bodhi Tree*, Hubbard, Jamie and Paul Swanson ed. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997.

30. See Cleary, trans., *The Flower Ornament Sutra*. Boulder: Shambhala, 1986.

31. Fenollosa, "Chinese and Japanese Poetry Lecture 1 vol. 1" 27–29. The earlier drafts of the CWC often contain analogous passages to those found in the version edited and published by Pound. In this case, his earlier draft retained the most clear articulation of his argument. See "Chinese & Japanese Poetry. Draft of Lecture I. Vol. I." (Yale University, Beinecke Library, Ezra Pound Papers, box 99, folder 4218). Also see Fenollosa's "Lecture on Analysis and Synthesis. BMS 1759.2 (50) p. 2 in the Houghton collection.

32. This process has already been set in motion by the forthcoming publication of unedited and unpublished versions of the CWC. See *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: a Critical Edition*. Ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klien, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008.

33. The chapter was submitted in October 2004, and an extensively revised and expanded version will appear in Stalling's book in progress, "The Poetics of Emptiness." See also *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, edited by Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. Saussy's introductory essay to that collection is informed by the argument presented here.

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## 2

# Gary Snyder's Selective Way to Cold Mountain

*Domesticating Han Shan*

YUEMIN HE

Han Shan, meaning “Cold Mountain,” is a Chinese T'ang (618–907) poet. He was unrecognized in China for more than a thousand years but has become well known to American poets and scholars since the middle of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> At least five major translators including Gary Snyder, Burton Watson, Red Pine (Bill Porter), Robert G. Henricks, and Peter Stambler have translated his work. Among them, Gary Snyder (1930–) is the most influential; he and the Beats really made Han Shan famous overnight in America.<sup>2</sup>

Snyder translated twenty-four of Han Shan's three-hundred-odd classic Chinese poems, publishing them first in *Evergreen Review* in 1958 and then including them with a 1965 reprinting of his 1959 collection *Riprap*. The 1965 book was entitled *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*. Twenty-one poems in Snyder's selection deal with Han Shan's life in Cold Mountain as a Buddhist hermit, while the other three comment mainly on more earthly pursuits either from Buddhist or Daoist perspectives (Snyder poems 4, 12, and 20).<sup>3</sup> These poems all emphasize the spiritual and the philosophical, characterizing nature as sentient and interconnected with men, and life as impermanent. In short, Snyder's selection portrays a Han Shan that is the quintessence of Chinese Zen Buddhism.

Critics such as Ling Chung, Thomas J. Lyon, Sherman Paul, and many others in *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder* read Snyder's translation and poetry as an effort to find an alternative to American culture of the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Modern civilization and industrialism were characterized as exploitive by writers such as Snyder, and this conflict between man and nature called for an ecological consciousness. Borrowing the intellectual and spiritual strength of the Chinese Mahayana philosophy that is embodied in Han Shan's poetry, Snyder has been seen as criticizing a culture that misunderstands nature and wallows mindlessly in its own destructiveness.

This interpretation stands in line with Snyder's own belief that there is, in contrast to mainstream approaches, "a body of paths which do come to the same goal—some with a more earthly stress, some with a more spiritual stress" (*RW* 68). Snyder's *Riprap* poems, including the Han Shan translations, are overtly contemplative and imbued with "Zen awareness and Zen detachment"; the Cold Mountain poems were meant to transmit spirituality to a Western culture mired in materialism (Murphy 81). Snyder's philosophy of translation emphatically claims that authentic transmission is possible through poetry: for Snyder, the poem in English "is not a translation of the words, it is the same poem in a different language, allowing for the peculiar distortions of my own vision—but keeping it straight as possible" (*RW* 178). Choosing literary over literal translation while "keeping it straight as possible," the spirit of Han Shan's poems, as understood by Snyder, also allowed for "peculiar distortions" and shows affinity with Snyder's "own vision." Han Shan's poems are presented as spiritual medicine to cure America of its materialistic ills, but the question of distortion remains to be discussed.

Though Snyder's translation strategies express a clear and uncontroversial aim, less critical attention has been given to the differences between Snyder's Han Shan and the Han Shan experienced by Chinese readers. Snyder's Han Shan and the Chinese Buddhist layman found in the Chinese-language poems differ both in their understanding of nature and their resultant activities. We need to examine in detail how Snyder's translation has simplified, altered, and redirected the representation of Han Shan, both in terms of his biography and his ideas. I will argue that Snyder's translation of Han Shan constitutes a classic example of how a "foreign text is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic interests." According to Venuti, "the inscription begins with the very choice of a text for translation, always a very selective, densely motivated choice, and continues in the development of discursive strategies to translate it, always a choice of certain domestic discourses over others" (468). To accomplish the set task, a detour is necessary to clarify the critical situation we are in concerning Han Shan, a relatively obscure Asian poet.

When importing the life of an important figure from one culture and language to another, we must try to assemble the details as best we can, given the historical ambiguities inherent in this case. So far there has been no consensus on the date of Han Shan's birth or death. His real name is unknown: because he lived alone at a place called Cold Mountain, seventy *li* west of the T'ang-hsing district of T'ien-t'ai, he called himself Cold Mountain. Two inferences about his life are often cited.<sup>5</sup> One infers that Han Shan lived during the early T'ang dynasty; the supporting evidence is Lu Ch'iu-Yin's preface to the poems of Han Shan. Lu claimed to be a petty official, who before heading for a new post in T'ai prefecture (in the vicinity of Cold Mountain) had a headache. The doctor brought in could not cure him. He was then visited by Feng-kan (Feng'gan), a Buddhist master from Kuo-ch'ing Temple. Feng-kan cured Lu's headache and, upon request, recommended Han Shan and his companion, Shih-te, to Lu as well. As soon as Lu arrived at T'ai, he went to Kuo-ch'ing Temple, first to visit Feng-kan's place, then proceeded to the kitchen to see Han Shan and Shih-te. The two men were laughing, shouting, clapping, and, when greeted by Lu, they rushed out of the temple and disappeared. Han Shan went to Cold Mountain, and Shih-te was nowhere to be found. Lu ordered Tao-ch'iao, a monk in the Temple, to "find out how Han Shan and Shih-te lived, to hunt up the poems written on bamboo, wood, stones, and cliffs, and also to collect those written on the walls of people's houses" (*Riprap* 42). In this way more than three hundred poems of Han Shan were retained. The Preface is undated, but a later postscript to the poems indicated that the story took place in the early T'ang dynasty (Henricks 3).

The other inference derives from *Hsien-chuan Shih-i* (cited in *T'ai-ping Kuang-chi* 55). This version says that Han Shan lived during the middle of the T'ang dynasty, alone in a mountain at T'ien-t'ai. Because the mountain was deep and snow-capped even in summer, it was called Cold Mountain or Cold Cliff, and the one who dwelt there called himself Cold Mountain. Han Shan liked to compose poems, and when struck by inspiration, he wrote poems on bamboo, trees and rocks. It is not known who took the trouble to put those poems together. Among the resulting three hundred plus poems, some are about Han Shan's reclusive life in the Cold Mountain; others are satires of society that aim at instructing the multitude. A T'ang Daoist called Xu Lin-Fu circulated these poems in three volumes.

Whenever Han Shan lived, we have to bear in mind that no agreement exists except that he probably lived in the T'ang dynasty. As far as Han Shan's identity is concerned, Lu Chi'u-Yin believed he was a poor man, whereas later in *Zu Tang Ji*, he is portrayed as a recluse. As far as the

authorship of the poems is concerned, scholars Yoshikawa Kojiro, E.G. Pulleyblank, Stephen R. Bokenkamp and Jia Jinhua have suggested that the Han Shan poems probably came from more than one hand. Given such conflicting background information, Han Shan “remains unknowable” and is perhaps nothing more than “a figment.”<sup>6</sup> Despite these complications, it is still meaningful to go back and explore my thesis that Han Shan—as revealed in the three hundred odd poems, whether they were written by one hand or were composed by multiple authors, whether of the Sui dynasty or T’ang dynasty—has been transformed and domesticated significantly in Snyder’s translations.

First, let us scrutinize how Han Shan’s image has been constructed in contemporary literary studies. Since many of the Han Shan poems preach Buddhism, people generally like to think of Han Shan as a poet monk. Poem 300 tells us his ambition before he lived in the mountains, and poems 15 and 111 are vignettes of his earlier life as farmer and father and husband. Poems 101 and 131 imply that he read and rode. Poem 49 captures the sadness he felt when visiting his former household after a departure of thirty years, where he learned of the demise of many friends. Based on these poems and other information, scholars assume Han Shan started as a farmer with a wife and a child and then became a scholar or official of sorts, as poems such as 120 and 113 record repeated failure in the imperial exams. Later in his life it would seem he dwelt in the Cold Mountain as a Buddhist and Daoist layman. Of course, it is entirely open to question whether all the experiences about which Han Shan wrote are from his own personal life. For many readers, the poems delineate the arc of a life.

If we consider the full range of Han Shan representations, from which we get a rather ambiguous portrait, we must recognize however that Snyder’s is a much more organized and even one-sided version of the life and work. While Snyder’s selection of twenty-four poems from more than three hundred poems is likely to present only a partial vision of the poet, this partiality becomes intentional rather than accidental or unavoidable if—keeping in mind the fact that Han Shan had various poetic interests beyond the Buddhist concerns that Snyder’s selection tends to offer its audience—we consider the nature of Snyder’s selections.<sup>7</sup>

Han Shan’s early poems indicate that he was also interested in secular subjects. In poem 32, the speaker asks: “What makes a young man grieve”? And he answers to himself: “he grieves to see his hair turn white” (Pine trans. 61). Poem 58 compares a society where people fight each other to “A pack of dogs [that] can’t share” bones (Pine 77). Poem 104 conveys his anger towards social inequality and shows his deep sympathy for the poor. The young rich are said to meet “in an elegant hall / [where] the colored lanterns

glowed so bright," but the poor person "who had no candle/ . . . was chased away, not allowed even to sit nearby" (Henricks 107). In poem 128, Han Shan suggests there should be marriage between men and women who are commensurate in age, a commonsensical proposal echoed in much ancient Chinese literature, such as *Guo Yu, Yan Zhi Chun Chiu* and so on (Chu 333). Poem 129 tells the story of a courteous young man, who, having spent his life reading classics and histories, finds himself suffering from lack of shelter in winter because of his inability to obtain employment or do manual labor. With this poem Han Shan argues that books sometimes can mislead people. However, in poem 218 Han Shan civic-mindedly advocates educating children: "In raising sons, if they don't study with a teacher / they won't measure up to the city park rats" (Henricks 303). Han Shan also urges people to learn to read and write. In poem 207, he writes: "a man unable to read / never finds any peace" (Pine 173). Poem 151 gives advice to a person who used to borrow from the speaker, but who is now stingy toward his past benefactor. While these concerns are not antithetical to kinds of postwar Zen Buddhism with which Snyder strongly affiliated himself, a consideration of the non-Snyder Han Shan foregrounds the (pro-Buddhist) ideology undergirding Snyder's selection process.

Conspicuous among Han Shan's numerous secular poems (6, 18, 35, 37, 42, 43, 50, 60, 62, 73, 124, 131, 132, 134, 140, 148, 175, to list just a few) are a block of poems about pretty young women. Poem 61 portrays young women who are at once charming and chaste. The last couplet—"Why must you bother us so long? / Our husbands might find out"—tonally echoes one of the *Han Yueh-fu*, "Bo Shang Shuang," which Ezra Pound once translated into "Ballad of the Mulberry Road."<sup>8</sup> In poem 131, the speaker meets a lovely woman in an equally lovely garden. The last couplet of this poem, "When we met, I wished to call out, / But choked up, I just couldn't speak" (Henricks 48) sounds similar to that of poem 10 in *The Nineteen Ancient Poems*: "Separated by a single surging stream / they look but cannot speak."<sup>9</sup> Poem 13 also portrays an alluring young woman:

At the Hall of jade hangs a curtain of pearls;  
Inside is a beautiful maid.

In appearance surpassing immortals and gods,  
Complexion glowing like the peach or the pear.

At the Eastern inn spring mists collect;  
At Western lodge fall winds arise.

And when the seasons have changed thirty years,  
She too will look like pressed sugar cane. (Henricks 48)

Echoing the romantic pursuit theme of poem 13, poem 14 describes another beautiful maiden in a way that has little to do with Buddhism or the lives of hermits or sages:

In the city, a maiden of beautiful brow;  
 Pearls at her waist—how they tinkle and ring.

She plays with her parrot in front of the flowers,  
 Strums her p'I-p'a beneath the moon.

Her long song resounds for three months;  
 Her short dance—ten thousand people will see.

It won't necessarily be always like this;  
 Hibiscus can't withstand the cold. (Henricks 49)

These evocations of the evanescence of youth and beauty were highly esteemed. According to Xue Xue of the Qing dynasty, poem 14 is typical of T'ang poetry because of its skillful portrayal of female elegance and versatility. Zhu Xi also regarded this poem highly; he humorously remarked that, though Han Shan depicted the girl remarkably well, he did not necessarily have the luck to see her in person (Chu 48).

Since Han Shan may have expected an official career before he retreated into the mountains, many of his poems also display an interest in people, events, and anecdotes from the Confucian classics and the dynastic histories. Such references suggest that Han Shan once had the desire to embark on the usual career as a scholar-official. In this respect, these poems are no different from those of other scholar-official poets. For example, poem 224 argues that "A state relies on people" (Pine 189), a piece of advice usually given to state rulers to advocate benevolent ruling and to caution against shortsightedness. According to our sources, for what they are worth, Han Shan received a Confucian education and was, before his retreat to the mountains, an ambitious man. Yet Han Shan's poetry expresses pain regarding thwarted ambition. The speaker in poem 33 exclaims in pain: "Who is to know that under this cap of cane / there is fundamentally a man who's been sad a very long time" (Henricks 72). The cap of cane was worn by commoners—that is, the T'ang and Song gentlemen who had not achieved distinguished rank. Evidently, Han Shan had a sharp sense of being unappreciated, a sentiment that had also overwhelmed countless other Chinese scholar-official poets.<sup>10</sup>

Daoism and Confucianism were native to ancient China and had existed long before Buddhism was imported into China. For a time in the T'ang dynasty the three beliefs influenced the Chinese more or less at the

same time, and it was by no means unusual for a person to be susceptible to more than one belief. That's why in Han Shan's poetry we also see a Daoist streak, and sometimes a mix of all three "isms." Poem 16 describes the poet mumbling about Daoist books on immortality in the tranquillity of the Cold Mountain. Poem 20 records that the reading of Daoist books has detached him from the constraints of time and space. Even the twenty-four poems chosen by Snyder to display a Zen Buddhist vision of nature include Daoist elements. For example, poem 11 (Snyder poem 4) writes:

I spur my horse through the wrecked town,  
 The wrecked town sinks my spirit.  
 High, low, old parapet-walls  
 Big, small, the aging tombs.  
 I waggle my shadow, all alone;  
 Not even the crack of a shrinking coffin is heard.  
 I pity all these ordinary bones,  
 In the books of the Immortals they are nameless. (*Riprap* 43)

Here the speaker, witnessing a wrecked city full of the dead, laments that those dead men lived futile lives and can never expect a place in the Daoist books of immortals. More dramatically, in poem 156 Daoist and Buddhist thoughts simply fuse (Snyder poem 15):

There's a naked bug at Cold Mountain  
 With a white body and a black head.  
 His hands hold two book-scrolls,  
 One the Way and one its Power.  
 His shack's got no pots or oven,  
 He goes for a walk with his shirt and pants askew.  
 But he always carries the sword of wisdom:  
 He means to cut down senseless craving. (*Riprap* 47)

The fourth line of this poem suggests that the speaker is reading the Daoist scripture, *Tao-te-ching*, but the seventh line says that he holds "the sword of wisdom," the Buddhist sword that can cut off our entanglement with worldly life and death. While there are more Han Shan poems such as poems 248 and 302 that bespeak of Daoist philosophical views, it suffices for the reader to discover that Han Shan's interests are legion and discursive.

In short, Han Shan's work consists of groups of poems that, taken as a whole, show a personality in evolution: A young man with an acute social consciousness became, as he aged, a Buddhist and Daoist layman who lived off in the clouds. To present Han Shan as completely as

possible would require attention to all the poems, yet Snyder's introductory selections—introductory for American readers, that is—constructs Han Shan from only eight percent of the total number of known poems. Snyder clearly selected according to his own social and religious concerns. Snyder's translations include primarily Han Shan's more spiritually overt texts, especially his Buddhist writings. The mundane as well as the dogmatic side of Han Shan has been erased. As a result, Han Shan as Snyder constructs him is flattened somewhat from the perspective of a Chinese reader who is aware of his full corpus—perhaps as finely focused as the two-dimensional image of Han Shan presented at the 1953 Japanese art exhibit in America, where Snyder was first introduced to him.<sup>11</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that the multiplicity of Han Shan has been considerably reduced.

Given such constraints as an audience completely unfamiliar with Han Shan and an author who was at the beginning of his career rather than in the middle of a magnum opus of translation, it may be unfair to accuse Snyder of simplifying the image of Han Shan, but it is quite useful to consider the ways in which Snyder also altered Han Shan in ways that aligned his selective translation with the particular cultural formations such as those we associate with Beat writing. Such movements specifically rebelled against the broad social, political, and religious characteristics of American culture of the 1950s.

We may think of environmentalism as something that became part of American counter-cultural dissent from the mainstream decades later, especially in the 1970s, but we see evidence of this progressive, countercultural construction of nature writing when we consider Snyder's construction-through-selection of Han Shan. In poem 111, Han Shan tells us:

When I was young, I'd take the classics along when I hoed;  
Originally I planned to live together with my older brother.

But because I met with criticism from the other generation,  
I was, even more, treated coldly by my own wife.

I have abandoned, rejected the realm of red dust;  
Constantly I roam about with the books I have love to read.

Who can lend me a dipper of water  
To revive and retrieve the fish that's caught in the rut? (*Henricks* 167)

As Han Shan repeatedly failed the imperial exams (poems 33, 113, 120), we might assume that Han Shan first went to live alone in Cold Mountain

out of helplessness. Personal or political problems were the conventional reasons within Chinese literature for coming to see through the “red dust” and seek escape.<sup>12</sup> Nature, meaning the sparsely populated mountain realms “far from the madding crowd,” offered Han Shan equanimity and peace that could help him escape from the sound and fury of secular social life. In poem 2 he asks, “all you owners of tripods and bells / what good are empty names?” He prefers to enjoy “white clouds clinging to dark rocks” (Pine 37). Later in poem 154 (Snyder poem 14) he marvels at the intrinsic vitality lurking in all things:

Cold Mountain has many hidden wonders,  
 People who climb here are always getting scared.  
 When the moon shines, water sparkles clear  
 When wind blows, grass swishes and rattles.  
 On the bare plum, flowers of snow  
 On the dead stump, leaves of mist.  
 At the touch of rain it all turns fresh and live  
 At the wrong season you can't ford the creeks. (*Riprap* 46)

This poem may seem to be merely a descriptive poem, but actually it conveys Han Shan's delight in a harmonious relationship with nature: people who climb the mountain are initially fearful of the otherness of nature, but the “dead stump” becomes alive in the vivifying rain.

Snyder's selection of the more Buddhist and proto-environmentalist poems befits the ideas about Buddhism that were being conveyed to American readers by postwar translations and popularizations (e.g., the books of Alan Watts). Not surprisingly, this harmony in nature available to the reclusive poet (though perhaps not to the short-term visitor) is really more sustained by Han Shan's belief in Buddhism than by any simple aesthetic pursuit or need to escape from personal or political problems. Mahayana Buddhism, of which Zen Buddhism is only a branch, interprets all beings as endowed with Buddha nature; all human beings are interconnected with other beings in nature. Humans and other beings are one, and all are a whole. This is essentially a nondualistic worldview that transcends, its more enthusiastic proponents would claim, the limitations of *partial* discrimination. Dualistic distinctions between mind and body are questioned, as are rigid hierarchies between humans and animals. That's why Chinese Buddhists value compassion, and that's also why some Buddhists, including lay Buddhists like Han Shan, generally practiced vegetarianism. The fact that the aforementioned “naked bug” (or what Henricks translates as “a naked critter”) later turns out to be a man reading religious scripture is not just word

play but striking proof of Han Shan's belief in the unity between humans and other creatures.

Snyder claimed in his Afterword to the 1990 edition of *Riprap & Cold Mountain Poems* that the poems collected in the volume represented his "first glimpse of the image of the whole universe as interconnected, interpenetrating, mutually reflecting, and mutually embracing" (65–66). However, Snyder's construction of nature, as also noted by John Whalen-Bridge, is sometimes dualistic in practice if not in theory, and this partially successful evocation of nonduality sometimes marks a distance between his own poems and Han Shan at his best. For instance, his first poem in *Riprap*, "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout," is often praised for its skillful and subtle withholding of the subject "I" until the second stanza, an artistic maneuver that makes the cleavage between land and self effectively dramatized:

Down valley a smoke haze  
 Three days heat, after five days rain  
 Pitch glows on the fir-cones  
 Across rocks and meadows  
 Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read  
 A few friends, but they are in cities.  
 Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup  
 Looking down for miles  
 Through high still air. (7)

The moralistic division city life (abandoned) and wilderness (embraced) subverts a the poem as an act of interconnectedness—though the poem is often read that way.<sup>13</sup> Particularly, it negates the idea that the poem can be read in the light of Han Shan's (or a Buddhist) idea of universal interconnectedness. The structure that continually informs the major theme of Snyder's collection is the rupture between nature and humans, and it records the existence of a "divorce between nature and culture" or "a faultline in American culture" (Selby). Since there is a divorce or faultline between nature and humans, Snyder's attempt to conjure or evoke in words the nonduality of natural order and human perception succumbs to a dualism of sorts. While critic Lee Bartlett has influentially argued that "it is difficult to detect much difference between 'Mid-August on Sourdough Mountain Lookout' . . . and, for example, 'I Settled at Cold Mountain Long Ago' (Snyder poem 7; Bartlett 107)," it is crucial for us to mark the fundamental difference between Han Shan's

and Snyder's respective views of nature. We must distinguish between Zen dogma and poetic practice, however; comparing Snyder's early efforts with some of the more developed versions of Han Shan to help us make such fine distinctions.

Snyder's motivations in juxtaposing a more transcendentalist Han Shan alongside his own anti-urban poems may be dualistic in various ways, but it is not anti-Buddhist. Hence, by placing *Riprap*, which is characterized by a style of direct *thing*-ness alongside the compilation of Cold Mountain poems, Snyder wants to supply material that will counter the senseless growth of machine civilization. It is a tactic that works in part because the Buddhist values that Han Shan's poems profess (in all of the translations discussed) lend themselves to ecological critiques of contemporary urban American civilization.<sup>14</sup> Even so, what Han Shan meant by interconnection is taken for granted, but questioning the interpretive moment can open up many interesting questions. Commonalities of landscape across the centuries can accommodate commonalities of value—or do we dehistoricize the poems too much when we make this kind of claim? Kahn writes that “the mountain landscape in Snyder's translations resembled the mountains of the Pacific Northwest far more than the T'ian-t'ai of South China” (9). Should we consider this projection and even “Orientalism,” or will we find that the *mistranslations* and projections are the most efficient connections and extensions of Han Shan's words into the English language?

Han Shan, as a particular kind of Buddhist writer, has, I am arguing, been altered, and how he was made known in Snyder's translation must be understood as a transformation. American literary Buddhism, by extension, is not an unconditioned transmission; it is also to some degree a construction. The poetic effects of Han Shan's writings have been altered through Snyder's choices as a translator; whether this can be helped, it improves our understanding of the literary transmission of values, beliefs, and practices across cultures to study these varied effects. The twenty-four poems that Snyder translated originally express Han Shan's emotional response to the magic beauty and tranquillity of the Cold Mountain, such as how spectacular the scenes are (see poems 3, 67, 31, and 154) and what exhilarating experiences the scenes evoke (see poems 163 and 28). More importantly, when those poems are put together with other Han Shan poems that Snyder did not select, they suggest the idea that mountain life helps one to “rise above such relative concepts as good and evil, sought and found, enlightened and unenlightened, and all the rest” (Blofield 15). This cathartic effect of the poems in turn points the reader to a key Buddhist belief: worldly gains, whether youth or wealth or fame or beauty, are always impermanent and

unworthy of pursuit. Rather, human beings should detach themselves from the grip of the secular gains so as to attain real enlightenment and enter Nirvana, which will lead them to a better future life. Han Shan's poetry is thus directed to the coming life.

By contrast, Snyder's translations root Han Shan's poems totally in this world, even if the Snyder selections (and Snyder's poetry in general) recommends detachment: we should not own anything that cannot be "left out in the rain." Snyder is pursuing an alternative culture that can counteract modern egoistic American civilization, and it is *this* life that matters. Snyder is never aiming at "getting out of this world." He wants to immerse himself deeply in this world and to make it better. He balances religious teachings with ecological interconnectedness for the purpose of creating a guiding principle by which Americans can find a way to live, and he uses the Cold Mountain poems answers the question of "what is to be done?"

As to "what is to be done," Han Shan's response is passivity and perhaps even indifference. Both Buddhism and Daoism are widely viewed as religions of passivity and kindness (Murphy, *Critical Essays* 83), although recent Buddhist thinkers such as Thich Nhat Hahn have challenged such views of Buddhism. Han Shan might have lived in the mountains because he was rather distraught with what he called "the world of red dust." Poems 33, 113, 120 indicate that he lived the life of a hermit not as a voluntary choice. Also, in his poems Han Shan simply follows Buddhist precepts and offers general advice. For instance, though he at times mocks others, and even laughs at people, and writes in a didactic mode (poems 36, 140, 43, 223), such sarcasm and caustic commentary are never directed at particular people or events. He does what he does casually and spontaneously; his is effortless effort. Since Han Shan regularly expressed belief in the unity and wholeness of everything in nature, he would not be against ecological action had it been necessary back in his age, but he definitely would not actively and voluntarily enact it. Indeed, to quote John Blofeld, an enthusiastic advocate of Han Shan, the Daoist way for Han Shan is to let people "do their thing" because "[g]uidance, if given at all, should be so subtle that the person concerned doesn't know he is being guided. Confrontation, to Taoists, is unthinkable" (Pine 32).

Like Han Shan, Snyder saw unity; but unlike Han Shan, Snyder didn't resign himself only to thoughts. He worked to enact his conviction—moving, proceeding, performing, and turning eventually political. When interviewed, Snyder once said:

To be true to Mahayana, you have to act in the world. To act responsibly in the world doesn't mean that you always stand back and let things

happen: you play an active part, which means making choices, running risks, and karmically dirtying your hands to some extent. That's what the Bodhisattva is all about. (*Real Work* 107)

This interpretation of Mahayana Buddhism reveals that Snyder's understanding of Buddhism is more dynamic than that of Han Shan's.

Snyder's ecological and social activism have shaped his poetic translation of Han Shan, and he romanticized Han Shan. Hisao Kanaseki rightly recognizes that Snyder astutely perceives "the human frailties and corruptions of institutionalized Buddhism" (Halper 74), but Kanaseki also takes note of "an image Snyder was to return to many times in his own poetry: the wandering working man, white, Indian or Oriental, appearing on highways, in work camps, monasteries and dreams." Snyder's Han Shan is an incarnation of Zen Buddhism in a Westerner's eyes, and yet "there is no direct evidence in the poems as to what form of Buddhism he [Han Shan] adhered to or practiced" (Kahn 2). Snyder's translation offered not a window into the Chinese culture, but a mirror that gave (countercultural, Zen-influenced) Americans an affirming reflection. Snyder has borrowed Han Shan but has "restored" (Barthes's term) him not to the original place. Snyder's domestication of Han Shan inevitably reminds us of what Robert Kern, one of the few critics who have perceived the deformation in Snyder's translations, says about Western translation: "the problem of Chinese translation has less to do with the effort to find accurate or even adequate representations of Chinese poetry than with the problem of representation itself, which is to say the West's problem of acknowledging and confronting its own conceptions of what is 'other' to it before contact with that other is even attempted" (175). As Kern wisely suggests, English-language readers should beware of translations and introductions of Han Shan. In our eagerness to consume various translations of Han Shan poetry we should keep our eyes, ears and hearts open, both to embrace and to discriminate, as no translator is likely to be free from the translator's paradox: He who translates also transforms.

#### NOTES

1. According to Chinese scholar Chu Xiang, for centuries Han Shan poetry circulated in China mainly among the Buddhists and it held no position in the Chinese literary canon. During the 1920s and 1930s, scholars started to pay attention to it, but the breakout of the Sino-Japanese war stopped the study. See Chu. Ling Chung offers a similar account of Han Shan's misfortune as a poet in China in "Reception."

2. In a 1992 interview with Gary Snyder, Eliot Weinberger asked Snyder: "I think at the time (the fifties and sixties) there were people who thought that you made him [Han Shan] up. I wondered how you discovered him?" The words "made him up" and "discovered" indicate clearly how, before Snyder translated him, Han Shan had been non-canonical in Chinese literature and had been known in the Far East merely as a Buddhist poet.

3. Because Snyder translated only a small number of Han Shan poems while this paper has to mention many other Han Shan poems, I have adopted Robert G. Henricks's numeration of the Han Shan poems throughout this essay. Henricks, Professor of Religions of China at Dartmouth College, has translated the largest number of Han Shan poems among all English Han Shan translators to capture the breath and depth of Han Shan poetry. After I have considered all the evidence, both in Chinese and English, I think the scope of Hendrick's translation serves as a convenient tool for academic research that must weave in and out of various versions of Han Shan translation. So besides including Snyder's numeration in parenthesis in the text, I have attached a finding list at the end of this paper to aid readers as well.

4. For detailed analyses, see Murphy's *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder* and Chung's "Reception."

5. Most of the background information comes from Henricks's book and my translation of Xiang Chu's *Annotations on the Poems of Han Shan*. The latter has been recognized as a key project in the Chinese academic field, and its author, Professor Chu, is an acknowledged authority on ancient Chinese (Beijing: Zhong Hua Shu Ju, 2000).

6. See Kojiro, Bokenkamp, Pulleyblank, and Jia.

7. In his introduction to his translation of Han Shan poems, Burton Watson specifically mentions seven divisions of subject matters to show the remarkable range of Han Shan's concerns. They are: laments on the shortness of life, complaints of poverty, satires on pride and avarice, accounts of bureaucratic system hardships, attacks on decadent Buddhist clergy, ridicule of seekers after eternal life, descriptions of natural settings, and allegories of spiritual questing and attainment. The last of these has made Han Shan famous (Watson 10).

8. Henricks, 107. Henricks's translation of the last couplet of this poem, "Why must you bother us so long? / Our husbands might find out," sounds similar to "How unthinking you are! / Just as you have your wife, / I, too, have my husband" (translated by Wai-lim Yip) in Han Yueh-fu, "Bo shang Shuang," which Pound translated into "Ballad of the Mulberry Road." For Pound's translation, see Wai-lim Yip's *Chinese Poetry*.

9. Pine, 126. Like Iritani and Matsumura, I regard this poem as a lyrical poem though there are critics who try to make Daoist and Buddhist associations. See notes in Henricks (197) and Pine (126).

10. Other poems with a clear Confucian ideology are 87, 113, 120, and 174.

11. In her article "Reception," Chung writes, Arthur Waley "discovered Cold Mountain Poems probably through his reading of Japanese publications while Snyder's interest was aroused by a Japanese painting of Han Shan." (89). For Snyder's own account in his preface to his Cold Mountain translation, see Leed.

12. See Blofeld's account of this issue in his introduction to Red Pine's *The Collected Songs of Cold Mountain*.

13. See Nick Selby.

14. Susan Kalter summarizes Snyder's critique of the dualistic construction of binaries such as nature/man and civilization/wilderness.

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A FINDING LIST FOR HAN SHAN POEMS  
USED IN THIS PAPER

*Name + Poem No. → Their Equivalents in Other Versions*

Henricks 2	Chu 2	Pine 1	Snyder 2	
Henricks 3	Chu 3	Pine 3	Snyder 1	
Henricks 9	Chu 9	Pine 16	Snyder 6	Stambler 3
Henricks 11	Chu 11	Pine 18	Snyder 4	Stambler 96
Henricks 13	Chu 13	Pine 20		
Henricks 14	Chu 14	Pine 7		
Henricks 15	Chu 15	Pine 21		
Henricks 16	Chu 16	Pine 22		
Henricks 19	Chu 19	Pine 25		
Henricks 20	Chu 20	Pine 4	Snyder 5	Stambler 93
Henricks 28	Chu 28	Pine 32	Snyder 8	Stambler 30
Henricks 31	Chu 31	Pine 35	Snyder 9	Stambler 63
Henricks 32	Chu 32	Pine 36		
Henricks 33	Chu 33	Pine 37		Stambler 122
Henricks 45	Chu 45	Pine 49		
Henricks 47	Chu 47	Pine 51		Stambler 57
Henricks 49	Chu 49	Pine 53	Snyder 10	Stambler 34
Henricks 55	Chu 55	Pine 58		Stambler 21
Henricks 58	Chu 58	Pine 61		
Henricks 59	Chu 59	Pine 62		
Henricks 61	Chu 61	Pine 64		
Henricks 67	Chu 67	Pine 6	Snyder 3	Stambler 102
Henricks 69	Chu 69	Pine 71		
Henricks 80	Chu 80	Pine 81		
Henricks 81	Chu 81	Pine 82	Snyder 11	Stambler 11
Henricks 95	Chu 95	Pine 95		
Henricks 101	Chu 101	Pine 101		
Henricks 104	Chu 104	Pine 104		
Henricks 111	Chu 111	Pine 111		
Henricks 113	Chu 113	Pine 113		
Henricks 117	Chu 117	Pine 116		Stambler 15
Henricks 120	Chu 120	Pine 119		Stambler 68
Henricks 128	Chu 128	Pine 127		

*Name + Poem No. → Their Equivalents in Other Versions*

Henricks 129	Chu 129	Pine 128		
Henricks 130	Chu 130	Pine 133	Snyder 13	Stambler 46
Henricks 131	Chu 131	Pine 134		
Henricks 151	Chu 151	Pine 154		
Henricks 154	Chu 154	Pine 157	Snyder 14	Stambler 62
Henricks 156	Chu 156	Pine 159	Snyder 15	
Henricks 163	Chu 164	Pine 26	Snyder 7	Stambler 71
Henricks 168	Chu 169	Pine 167	Snyder 16	
Henricks 170	Chu 171	Pine 169	Snyder 17	
Henricks 174	Chu 175	Pine 173		
Henricks 179	Chu 180	Pine 178		
Henricks 180	Chu 181	Pine 179	Snyder 18	
Henricks 181	Chu 182	Pine 180	Snyder 19	Stambler 92
Henricks 185	Chu 186	Pine 184		
Henricks 186	Chu 187	Pine 188	Snyder 20	
Henricks 193	Chu 194	Pine 193	Snyder 21	
Henricks 201	Chu 202	Pine 203	Snyder 22	Stambler 125
Henricks 203	Chu 204	Pine 205	Snyder 23	
Henricks 207	Chu 208	Pine 201		
Henricks 218	Chu 219	Pine 216		
Henricks 220	Chu 221	Pine 218	Snyder 24	
Henricks 224	Chu 225	Pine 222		
Henricks 260	Chu 261	Pine 259		
Henricks 270	Chu 271	Pine 268		
Henricks 274	Chu 275	Pine 271		
Henricks 300	Chu 302	Pine 131	Snyder 12	

# 3

## John Giorno

### *Buddhism, Poetry, and Transgression*

MARCUS BOON

*"I'm not a Buddhist poet. I'm not a non-Buddhist poet. I'm just a poet."*

These are the first words that John Giorno says to me when I meet him to discuss his work for this book. He is increasingly emphatic about this during our conversation, and I believe he means it when he says it. As the premise of the interview goes up in smoke, I struggle to reconcile this statement with what I find and love in Giorno's poetry—poems entitled "Guru Rinpoche" and "Vajra Kisses," filled with Buddhist images and ideas. Nevertheless, Giorno pours tea, we talk, and I begin to think that perhaps, to use the title of another of Giorno's poems, the idea of claiming Giorno as a Buddhist poet is merely "Grasping at Emptiness." And Giorno's refusal to grasp at Buddhism or any particular form of poetry for that matter might be the necessary prerequisite for something interesting to happen, just as the experience and understanding of emptiness is the prerequisite for the Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism that Giorno has been a student of for thirty years now. So, at the beginning of this chapter, I will affirm that Giorno's poetry is what it is, perfect and pure, and whether I label it as "Buddhist" does not ultimately matter. At the same time, I will make the case that the power and beauty of Giorno's poetry, the particular ways in which he

constructs poems, can be understood better with some knowledge of Buddhism. And that Giorno's work makes an important contribution to a continuing debate about Buddhism in the West, today and in the future.

I am interested in particular in three books of Giorno's: *Cancer in My Left Ball* (1973); *Shit Piss Blood Pus and Brains* (1977); *Grasping at Emptiness* (1985), written between 1970 and 1985; and in the explosive studio and live recordings of Giorno performing his poems from that same period that were issued on his record label, Giorno Poetry Systems. It should be emphasized that recordings and performances of Giorno's work are as important as words printed on a page, especially in the light of Giorno's long association with European sound poetry. In understanding the relation between Buddhism and poetry in Giorno's work, note that all definitions of poetry or Buddhism themselves are highly contested today, and this may account for much of the confusion that surrounds Giorno's work too. Giorno has been written about as a Buddhist, and as an experimental poet. The Buddhist articles have focused on Giorno's long association with masters of the Tibetan Nyingma lineage, including Giorno's main teacher HH Dudjom Rinpoche,<sup>1</sup> or on issues relating to Giorno's being gay and Buddhist,<sup>2</sup> while steering clear of the specifics of his poetry, with its graphic descriptions of sex, drugs and violence, New York City style, mixed with descriptions of deity yoga practices and teachings on emptiness, all cut up into diamond-like fragments of text and sound that have the energy of punk rock. Giorno's work is not included in either of the 1991 or 2005 collections of poetry by American Buddhists.<sup>3</sup> Writers on the poetic avant-garde, such as Richard Kostelanetz, seem equally puzzled by Giorno's work, focusing on his use of technical innovations, such as multitracked voice recordings and his signature double line with a margin running down the center of each page, looping and repeating phrases over and over, while criticizing him for using traditional sentence structures and semantic units, and for the most part ignoring his interest in Buddhism.<sup>4</sup>

What *is* Giorno up to in the poem "Guru Rinpoche" (the title refers to Padmasambhava, the Indian Buddhist master who brought Buddhism to Tibet in the eighth century, and founded the Nyingma lineage that Giorno has studied in) when he juxtaposes stanzas such as:

Imagine Imagine that you are offering the whole world	Imagine Imagine that you are offering the whole world that you are offering
---	--

<p>that you are offering  the whole world  to Guru  Rinpoche  to Guru Rinpoche</p>	<p>the whole world  to Guru  Rinpoche  to Guru Rinpoche</p>
--	---

with others such as:

<p>I like  to watch  the expression  on your face  I like to watch  the expression on your face  when you shoot  your load  when you shoot your load  up  my ass  up my ass," he said  he said,  smiling  smiling</p>	<p>I like  to watch  the expression  on your face  I like to watch  the expression on your face  when you shoot  your load  when you shoot your load  up  my ass  up my ass," he said  he said,  smiling  smiling</p>
---	---

Is this "Buddhist poetry"? To quote another stanza from the same poem:

<p>It is  and is not  It is and is not,  it both is  and is not  it both is and is not  it neither is  nor is not  it neither is nor is not,  it both  is and is not  and neither is nor is not  it both is and is not  and neither is nor is not"<sup>5</sup></p>	<p>It is  and is not  It is and is not,  it both is  and is not  it both is and is not,  it neither is  nor is not  it neither is nor is not,  it both  is and is not  and neither is nor is not  it both is and is not  and neither is nor is not"</p>
--	---

The relationship between Buddhism and the arts in the West is a complicated one. If it is true to say that Giorno's work in the 1970s had formal precedents in the lineage of the Western avant-gardes, rather than being the direct result of applying insights and techniques gained in Buddhist meditation and studies, it is equally true that the history of the Western avant-gardes can be linked to Buddhism in a number of places. Furthermore, the innovations and developments of the avant-gardes also created a milieu that was highly receptive to Buddhist ideas. Finally, the line between Buddhism and other Asian religions such as Hinduism, Daoism, and Sufism has been blurred by a number of Western writers, including Giorno in his 1960s poems. Especially in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, the line between Asian and Western mystical techniques was similarly blurred—for example by the Theosophists, Crowley and Gurdjieff.

The drive of the Western avant-gardes to abandon all traditional forms, and to critique art as a mode of representation as well as of individualistic production can be dated back to the French Symbolists at least. This crisis of form, as it moved through different milieus in the twentieth century, was often accompanied by an interest in spiritual techniques that would allow artists to operate under conditions of radical formlessness and the dissolution of the ego and of the artwork, conceived as traditional form. Daumal, Artaud, and Bataille drew on Buddhist and Yogic teachings during the Surrealist period—and were thrown out by Breton in part for their interest.<sup>6</sup> After World War II in America, John Cage and the Beats' interest in Zen can also be seen to emerge out of this crisis of form. The flowering of fluxus, multimedia art, happenings, and, to a lesser degree, pop art, are all connected to this questioning of form, both in Eastern and Western contexts. It is within this tradition of crisis that Giorno's work should be situated.<sup>7</sup>

It is tempting to also situate Giorno's poetry within an Orientalist literary tradition. While there is a long tradition within European and American literature of appropriating images and ideas from Asian religions and placing them within a Western aesthetic or social context, a tradition that includes Eliot's *The Waste Land*, for example,<sup>8</sup> writers like Giorno who, whether converting to an Asian religion or not,<sup>9</sup> have studied with Asian teachers and engaged in meditation and other practices aimed at the direct transformation of the mind, force us to reexamine what we mean by Orientalism. I argue that the shift from a discursive relationship to Buddhism to a practice-based one is decisive in this regard, and suggests important new ways of thinking about East–West relations, as well as what it means to call oneself a Buddhist poet—or not. In particular, it suggests the possibility of a “poetic practice” whose emphasis on practice

evades the dogmas of poetics while not being reducible to pragmatism or a crude kind of spontaneity.

Giorno's poetry can be divided into three distinct periods: his early work until 1970, which features heavy use of montage and appropriation; his works of the 1970s and 1980s (listed above), produced after he began formal study of Tibetan Buddhism with HH Dudjom Rinpoche; and works after 1985, when he abandoned the use of appropriated source texts (some of which are collected in *You Got To Burn To Shine*).

Giorno who was born in 1936 grew up on Long Island, New York, in an Italian family. He began writing poetry when he was fourteen, and was quickly drawn to the post-Beat downtown New York poetry scene. But Giorno's work does not fit easily within the well-known poetic communities of that time. Although Allen Ginsberg was a friend (and certainly none of Giorno's work could exist without the total freedom of content that "Howl" made possible), the form of Giorno's poems is radically different from the mostly traditional lyrical stance of the Beats. Similarly, although his poems share an interest in the everyday as poetic object, Giorno's interest in appropriation and his connections to the pop artists limited his relationship to the New York School poets such as O'Hara and Ashbery. Giorno's early works, published in *Poems* (1967) are full of appropriations and recontextualizations similar to the work of the pop artists. Giorno had some early fame as the star of Andy Warhol's first film *Sleep*, and he connects many of the ways his poetry developed with his relationships with key New York visual arts figures, including Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns, who were all lovers and friends at various points. From them, Giorno developed an interest in using found objects, whether images or texts or sounds, in his work. *The American Book of the Dead* (written in 1964, excerpted in *Poems* but never published in full), appropriates texts from a variety of sources (The Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction," for example), which are presented more or less intact, although they are reconfigured for the page or the breath. The title of the poem itself is appropriated from a Tibetan burial manual translated into English by Tibetan Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdrup then compiled and published in 1927 by W.Y. Evans-Wentz as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which was then in turn appropriated by Timothy Leary in 1962 as a manual to "guide" those taking LSD.

Another source of Giorno's 1960s work is the cut-up experiments that William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin undertook at that time. When Burroughs and Gysin returned to New York for nine months in 1965, Giorno conducted tape experiments with Gysin, and, at Gysin's suggestion, sent a sound poem recording to Bernard Heidsieck in Paris, which was accepted for a festival of sound poetry. Giorno's interest in repetition owes a lot to Gysin's permutation poems of the early 1960s. However, Giorno's work,

which is often based on a written text rather than primary sound explorations, is qualitatively different from Gysin's, as it is from many of the other Domaine Poétique writers, and other sound poets with whom Giorno had performed at festivals in Europe since the late 1960s.

Through his connections with Burroughs and Gysin, as well as the fluxus, Intermedia, and related multimedia events unfolding at venues such as New York's Judson Theater, Giorno's poetry evolved rapidly into multimedia forms, in which the written word on the page was just one element. After working with Gysin on tape poems, he collaborated with synthesizer inventor Bob Moog doing audio mixes and synthesized treatments of his voice as early as 1968, presenting them as installations or "ESPE—Electronic Sensory Poetic Environments" in a variety of public spaces. A note at the back of 1970s *Balling Buddha* says that when the poems "Johnny Guitar" and "Cunt" were played using a "stereo Moog tape," six stereo speakers and 4,500 watts of multi-color lighting, at St. Marks in 1969, "a pitcher of LSD punch was on a table at the side of the altar. The audience was invited to help themselves. Each cup contained ¼ of a trip. 5 gallons of punch were given away."<sup>10</sup> Giorno also organized the Dial A Poem series, beginning at the Architectural League of New York in 1967, making short poems by contemporary poets available over phonelines.

*Balling Buddha* is a transitional work. It introduces Giorno's split line running down the center of each page—both as a way of reproducing the multitracking in his sound poems, and as a way of perturbing the linear flow of text on the page. While the earlier poems often consist entirely of found materials, *Balling Buddha's* poems use montage in a systematic way, breaking apart found materials and placing them alongside apparently unrelated materials. Although, as the title *Balling Buddha* might suggest, Giorno did in some sense incorporate Buddhism and other Asian religions into his 1960s poems, this happens strictly at the level of content, and then only as part of a miscellany of references to various religious practices and images, often placed, as with "Balling" (i.e., making love) and "Buddha," next to highly profane images in a provocative way.

Giorno was first introduced to Buddhism as an undergraduate at Columbia, where, from 1956 to 1958, he took classes in the newly established "Oriental Civilization" program established by Theodore de Bary. The program offered almost no study of Tibetan Buddhism, since very little was known about Tibet. It was only with the 1959 takeover of Tibet by China and the ensuing flight to India of many of the great lamas (and ordinary citizens) to escape persecution and probable death at the hands of the Chinese that Tibetan Buddhism became accessible to Westerners. In the 1960s Tibetan settlements sprang up throughout the Indian Himalaya,

and a small stream of Westerners, including the poets Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Joanne Kyger, visited them in India. However, very few Tibetan teachers visited America in the 1960s; Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the lama most associated with spreading Tibetan Buddhism in North America, did not visit until 1971. It was rare to find an American or European practicing Tibetan Buddhism.<sup>11</sup> Ginsberg, for example, would later become a practicing Tibetan Buddhist, but in the 1960s, he was involved with a variety of religious practices from shamanism to Vedanta to a variety of Buddhist forms, while Snyder, Kyger, and many of the Beat writers were committed to Japanese Zen Buddhism.<sup>12</sup>

Although there were opportunities to practice Zen meditation in New York at that time, Giorno didn't take advantage of them. In a 1974 interview, he observed that his attitude had been "just the usual 1960s 'take LSD and see Buddha'" (Leyland 1978, 132). Giorno's first visit to India was a result of a post-LSD trip conversation with an impatient Ginsberg, who urged him to stop asking questions about spiritual practice and to go find out for himself. In March 1971 he arrived in India, traveling with friends, visiting His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, and studying Tibetan religion and language before meeting His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, Jigdrel Yeshe Dorje, supreme head of the Nyingma Order, one of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism, who was to become his guru. Dudjom Rinpoche is considered one of the great scholars of Tibetan Buddhism of the twentieth century and a master meditator and yogi. He was also considered a great poet, writing down revealed teachings (or *terma*) in poetic form. Giorno returned to India many times to study and live close to H. H. Dudjom Rinpoche in the 1970s, and in 1976 he invited him to America. Giorno also studied with many of the other great living Nyingma lamas, including Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, Kangyur Rinpoche, and Chatral Rinpoche. He was also one of the first students to study with Trungpa Rinpoche when he arrived in America, and Giorno took many retreats at the Tail of the Tiger, the retreat center that Trungpa established in Vermont.

*Cancer in My Left Ball*, which collects poems from 1970 to 1972, represents a leap forward in the quality of Giorno's work. Many of the elements in the poems, including the use of found texts, the split/double line running down the page, the use of repetition, the juxtaposition of sacred, pornographic, and political materials, are the same as those found in *Poems* and *Balling Buddha*. But the arbitrary juxtaposition of stanzas in the earlier poems, reminiscent of Burroughs and of Gysin's cut ups, has been replaced by chaotic, pulsating fluxes of phrases which no longer read like a formal experiment in collage or an attempt to replicate certain delay effects made possible by the use of tapes in Giorno's late 1960s sound environments. Instead, they

have the quality of a meditating mind, a mind observing itself and its environment and trying to provide a representation in words of what it sees and hears, using all the available strategies of the twentieth-century avant-garde.

It is nevertheless difficult to define the difference between the earlier poems and those in *Cancer*. The poems remain broadly non-linear, but no longer read as random or arbitrary. The notion of a mandala is helpful in describing the peculiar organization of the poems. Although mandalas are best known in the West in the form of geometric “sacred enclosures” found in some Tibetan thangka and sand paintings, one of Giorno’s Tibetan teachers, Chögyam Trungpa, offers the following as a description of the principle underlying mandalas in Tibetan Buddhism:

. . . mandala is that which is contained in everyday life. That includes the animate and the inanimate, form and the formless, emotion and non-emotion. Wherever there is relationship, that seems to be the mandala principle. . . . Mandala literally means “group,” “society,” “organization,” that which is interlinked. It is like the accumulation of a lots of single details, which, put together, make a whole. (Trungpa 125)

In this sense, a mandala is related to the practice of montage that I have discussed above, except that a mandala, according to Trungpa, is “orderly chaos,” a self-existing or organizing pattern that manifests through meditation.<sup>13</sup> When I ask Giorno whether a poem can be considered a mandala, he responds: “it can be, but not necessarily. A mandala is something else. In the broadest sense you can consider a poem a mandala, in that there’s the Buddha mind in the center of it, of whatever the concept is, and what surrounds it is its mandala, is its palace, you know?” This spatial metaphor—the mandala as a configuration of space, a pattern, around a Buddha-mind—is an accurate description of these poems, in the sense that they display a pattern of thoughts, experiences that are viewed in the context of a Buddhist practice.

The use of repetition, and the superimposition of symmetrical and asymmetrical elements is a key feature of many mandalas, and it is one that Giorno deploys in his poetry repeatedly. One subtle shift between *Balling Buddha* and *Cancer in My Left Ball* is in the use of the double column/line. *Balling Buddha* either employs a one-line lag between the left and right columns of text, which otherwise duplicate each other, or (in “Johnny Guitar”) no apparent continuity whatsoever between the two columns. But *Cancer in My Left Ball* uses repetitive but highly unstable loops, which imitate the way that words may arise in the mind, never as whole, fully present objects, but as fluttering fractal fragments constantly dissolving and reappearing in slightly altered forms, each column a slightly distorted mirror of

the other, still employing a one line lag, but shifting in direction, and occasionally becoming symmetrical. This instability was further developed in the title poem of *Grasping at Emptiness* (1985), which uses many variations of unstable reflection and repetition between the two columns. Again, the use of symmetry in the construction of the mandala—symmetry as a way of producing a self-reflexive pattern that does not rely on any deeper notion of order, form or identification—resonates with Giorno’s use of the double column. If the visual mandalas of Tibetan Buddhist iconography use certain geometric principles to express Buddhist ideas of microcosm-macrocosm, self and world, and so on, Giorno discovered a similar set of poetic principles that function textually in the same way.

The introduction to *Cancer in My Left Ball* is a Buddhism-saturated account of Giorno’s getting cancer in his left testicle, an operation to remove the cancer—“all in all it was my best tantric meditation”—and his subsequent recovery. Giorno draws a link between the cancer in his body, the poems (“you might say that both are the result of the same karma”), and the appropriations from newspapers, TV and radio concerning Vietnam and other contemporary events found therein (“you might also say the poems bear the same relationship to American karma”). Karma, usually understood as “action,” or more generally, “cause and effect,” is in this sense the agent of organization or manifestation of the poems, a kind of continuity or formal principle, which connects the otherwise apparently discontinuous parts. Of course, this could be said of any poem, or any mental production whatsoever. One’s mental state, one’s thoughts, and one’s experiences and environment are determined, from a Buddhist point of view, by past actions (i.e., one’s karma). But the various techniques used by twentieth-century poets to displace a traditional, poem-inscribing poetic ego or will—the use of found materials, repetition, montage—open up a space of indeterminacy where “karma” is exposed as a more fundamental determinant of what happens in the poem. Lautréamont’s chance meeting on a dissecting table and Mallarmé’s roll of the dice look different after Cage’s experiments with the *I Ching* and Giorno’s devotional exploration of the aleatory.

As to the content of the poems, Giorno says of his poetry that it is words, lines that arise in the mind, which are then worked with in different ways. Thus, Giorno’s relationship to his words is different from traditional lyrical approaches, in which words are considered a reflection of self, but also from the avant-garde tradition that posits that there is no such thing as a self, and therefore only random, indeterminate aggregations of meaning. Without repeating the rigorous Mahayana Buddhist assertions of the Madhyamika school concerning self that I quoted above (“It neither is, nor

is not” etc.),<sup>14</sup> Giorno’s poetry of this period contains lines and stanzas that are recognizable cognitive patterns, which may be said to exist phenomenologically and relatively, without requiring any assertion that the provisional self, which experiences or thinks these thoughts exist in any absolute sense. They are phrases that are “found” in the mind and in everyday speech and culture, and they mimic the fluttering discontinuities of cognition itself, phrases and ideas that never definitively appear, but repeat and refract discontinuously before being overlaid with further thought-phrases. Giorno’s poetry suggests thought as it appears to a meditator who has been instructed neither to grasp or hold onto particular thoughts, nor to push thoughts away or repress them, but rather to let thoughts arise in the mind in a natural way, coming and going, arising into awareness without attraction or aversion. In these poems, Giorno becomes a bricoleur of his own thoughts—as perhaps every poet is.

Giorno gave up using appropriated found texts as well as the double-column page in the early 1980s, preferring to work directly with whatever arises in his mind.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the lack of identification of the meditator with the thoughts that apparently constitute the self opened up new uses of found materials, since, if the self is groundless, “other” too must be groundless. Self and other construct themselves reciprocally in impermanent fluxes. The very possibility of appropriation relies on the impossibility of any object defining or constituting itself entirely from its own side. All subject-object relations in a sense involve the appropriations of objects, and appropriation is itself an act by which the subject attempts to constitute itself through a performance of apparent agency. In this sense, the apparition of subject and object occur through their mutually dependent co-arising (to use Buddhist terminology). Giorno’s exploration of this dynamic is facilitated by his use of the second person as the mode of address in many of his poems. This “you” is a dissociating “I.”

Giorno’s use of transgressive, provocative, or pornographic materials must be understood within this context: that all thoughts that arise in the mind are in a sense free, including the most obscene and mundane ones. Giorno recently commented to me on this issue:

I’m a gay man living in this world in the 1990s. What I did in my everyday life was what everyone else did. So if it seems like rough S & M images, difficult images, it’s what the world is made of. I wasn’t trying to create something that was other than what it is. Those images seem like non-Buddhist images as they probably are, but I’ve never thought of myself as a Buddhist poet or a non-Buddhist poet. I’m just a poet! (*sounds exasperated*) So all those images were just the world around me.

And the point of it all was that these images are just as empty as anything, everything else is empty. . . . These images are no different from something that appears to be solid, like me sitting on this chair. Or an image that appears on a page. It's just as empty. And I worked with that concept, never saying the words that I'm saying now, but in the context of why they're in poems it's about that, their empty nature being the empty nature of all phenomena.

Furthermore, to use these images in the poem as found material is in a sense to liberate them. And this liberation is an act of compassion, in the Buddhist sense, insofar as one removes fear and attachment from thought:

Compassion for gay men and gay women has been the object of my life's work. Even before I knew what I was doing, I was doing it. Before I knew that what was arising in my heart was called compassion. Those early 1960s poems that were pornographic, in your face, were intended to break all concepts. I wanted to liberate myself and the poem, so that everyone would be free.<sup>16</sup>

These "obscene" images are thoughts that arise in the mind and, therefore, from a Buddhist point of view, they are inherently free, stainless. By including them in a poem, Giorno enacts the liberation of thoughts that is part/goal of his meditation practice. But these are not just any thoughts, they're the thoughts of a gay man in New York City at a particular time and insofar as society considers these thoughts taboo or wrong, the articulation of these thoughts is transgressive, and the claim to the liberation of these thoughts a political one. In pre-Stonewall USA, where the mere statement of gay male desire or identity was a radical act, this was particularly the case. From the 1970s onward, Giorno's point of view seems more ambiguous. Certainly there's a hedonistic and spiritual celebration of the pleasures of sex and drugs, particularly in a gay male context. On the other hand, as the introduction to *Cancer in My Left Ball* suggests, these same pleasures could also be considered poisons, driven by attachment. The poems show

The cause of suffering in the American body, pictures of New York hells and heavens with cocksucking hunger-ghosts and elephants inside our loves. Endless thought saturation making our minds into prisons for the survival of those poison pictures. It's what we're dying of America!<sup>17</sup>

In a deeper sense, as Giorno says above, these fantasies, images, and acts are neither good nor bad, they simply are. Yet they are presented in an accurate way, honestly, articulating pleasure when it's there, but neither celebrating nor denigrating them from any particular ideological position.

There's a lot of confusion in the poems, moments of pleasure followed by moments of suffering. The juxtaposition of spiritual and pornographic imagery reflects an aspiration that these pleasures may be purified (of any fear or attachment surrounding them, rather than "sin" in a Christian sense), and perhaps that the surface of the poem itself may be a space of purification, a place where things are purified and are revealed in their emptiness, which is the emptiness of all phenomena. This is particularly evident in a poem like *Shit Piss Blood Pus and Brains*, in which appropriations from radio songs, newspapers, weather, stock reports, and other images of the Me generation's obsession with the good life, beauty, money, sex, and power slowly decay as the narrator is overwhelmed by fears of getting old, and with paranoid and obsessive thoughts. Toward the poem's end, the narrator has a vision of his own death and a *Tibetan Book of the Dead* like vision of *sunyata*/emptiness, whose attributes are listed as "clear . . . vacuous . . . without duality . . . transparent . . . timeless . . . uncompounded . . . unimpeded . . . colorless . . . naked . . . immaculate . . . not made of anything . . . being void."<sup>18</sup> This liberating (into) emptiness is:

without anything that can be indicated	Without anything that can be indicated
without anything that can be indicated	without anything that can be indicated
without words	without words
without words	without words
without words, not	without words, not
to be realized	to be realized
through effort	through effort
not to be realized	not to be realized
through effort	through effort
not to be realized through effort	not to be realized through effort
without anything to be done	without anything to be done
without anything to be done	without anything to be done
without anything to be done,	without anything to be done,

inconceivable	inconceivable
inconceivable	inconceivable
inconceivable	inconceivable
and unceasing	and unceasing
in flow	in flow <sup>19</sup>

The poem does not end with this vision of emptiness and liberation, though, shifting instead to a section on dreaming, and finishing with the question: “where do your dreams go?” Giorno’s poems are realistic in the sense that they acknowledge the failure (for now) of these *sadhanas*, the pervasive, continuing presence of suffering, the continual drive toward new pleasures and distractions, as well as the occasional moments of true bliss and wisdom.

Giorno’s poems, although “just poems,” are concerned with a threefold liberation. First, they articulate an aesthetic liberation that frees words and other semantic units so that they can be apprehended anew, as if for the first time, in the tradition of the twentieth-century avant-gardes. Second, they announce a political liberation that aims at freeing particular meanings, events, identities, and understandings from prejudice and injustices, in the tradition of the radical political movements that arose in the 1960s around the world. And finally, Giorno calls for a spiritual liberation that aims at removing all attachment and fear from inherently empty phenomena, including the words that manifest in a poem, in the tradition that the Buddha taught. These liberations are interdependent, simultaneous, and, from an absolute point of view, neither existent nor nonexistent, never having been attained or not attained.

I am not claiming that Giorno’s poetry represents or embodies Tibetan Buddhism of the Nyingma lineage in any systematic way. Giorno, who says he’s a strong believer in compartmentalizing, would certainly not make that claim either. Yet it remains the case that the Nyingma lineage, which dates back to Guru Padmasambhava, who first brought Buddhist teachings to Tibet from India in the eighth century, is probably the most socially progressive of the four major Buddhist lineages in Tibet. Although monasticism is important in Nyingma tradition, many of the most important figures in the lineage have been hermits/yogis, and many, including HH Dudjom Rinpoche have been married, with families.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the importance of revealed teachings (*terma*) in the Nyingma lineage, can be said to have a poetic meaning, especially since teachers like Dudjom Rinpoche were renowned as poets: they wrote down revealed teachings in poetic form.<sup>21</sup> Although Giorno makes no claim that he is a teacher or that his poems contain teachings, the practice of writing down what appears in

the mind has been framed in a more or less conscious way by Giorno, similar to the meditation instructions given by his teachers.

These written texts are, as I have said, only one aspect of Giorno's poetry. From the mid-1960s, when Giorno was introduced to sound poetry by Brion Gysin, Giorno has made recordings of his poetry, often using multitracked or multiple voices. He has performed at many festivals of sound poetry in Europe, and also pioneered performance poetry in the U.S., performing in rock clubs, either on his own or with a rock band, often on the same bill as William S. Burroughs. In conversation, Giorno reveals a surprising connection between his fiery performance style and the Tibetan heat generation meditation practice called *tumo*, which was practiced most famously by the great Tibetan saint Milarepa:<sup>22</sup>

I use a lot of energy when I perform, it's aggressive in that it's an explosion of energy. I'm using my voice and air, and I figured out a way of pushing the air down into my belly, and then getting other air and letting it all out in a stream. In Tibetan Buddhism there's something called a *bungpa*, a vase that's below one's stomach, which you fill with subtle air and that's what generates heat. So there I am on stage pouring sweat and using this air in my chest, pushing it down, generating all this heat. Quite early on I got these *tumo* teachings from Dudjom Rinpoche, maybe 1973, and I began to put two and two together: that I was doing something unconsciously similar to *tumo*, the generation of inner heat. So then I worked with that myself, and to this day, I very much do a *tumo* sort of way of the wind and the heat inside my body. It generates heat, but heat is energy and the energy enters the sound of your voice. Tibetan yogis do it to work with their mind in meditation, I'm using it as a poet performing.

Sound has a particular importance for Giorno, since sound has a very basic relationship to the emptiness (*sunyata*) out of which forms emerge, in Buddhist as well as Sufi and Vedanta teachings. According to Giorno: "Poetry's basic nature is Mind. Then it takes many forms. Words come from sound, and sound is wisdom, and wisdom is compassion and emptiness. All of it arises out of emptiness. The sound arises out of emptiness and is wisdom. That's first. Then the words, if you're a poet you write it down. In my case, perform it so that it returns to sound. After it arises in the mind it can take countless forms."

As Douglas Kahn has shown, the crisis of form in the twentieth-century avant-gardes precipitated a move toward sound as a primary category of experience and organization. Giorno's own work followed this trajectory, but—as with a number of other key figures in twentieth-century arts—at a certain point, the context of this valorization of sound

shifts from one rooted in scientific or aesthetic experiment to one rooted in Asian religious thought, where all manifestation is considered a product or effect of sound.<sup>23</sup>

Is Giorno a “Buddhist poet,” then? Whether he is or not, I have shown some of the ways that his work changed after his commencing formal Buddhist studies with H. H. Dudjom Rinpoche. Many of the elements of Giorno’s poetry already existed prior to his becoming a Buddhist. However, these elements—an interest in montage, appropriation, sound and concrete poetry, both transgressive images and those taken from Asian spiritual traditions—took on a different meaning when Giorno began a Buddhist practice. Giorno’s 1960s poems celebrate a certain vision of indeterminacy, of meaning developed through the juxtaposition of heterogeneous elements, of transgression as part of an aesthetics of shock, of appropriation as an act of recontextualizing preexisting materials, allowing them to resonate in the open, abstract space of art. This vision is one that can be traced back through his mentors Gysin and Burroughs, Warhol, Rauschenberg, Johns, and others, back through the twentieth century to Duchamp, the Surrealists, and Dadaists. But this entire tradition is transformed when it is placed in the context of Giorno’s Buddhist practice as it develops in the 1970s. The decentering of self and form is no longer an experiment but a practice, and out of this practice emerges not a refusal of meaning nor a nihilistic denial of the self, but an accurate phenomenological depiction of a self, and poetic forms or assemblages as an impermanent, fragmentary, temporary and temporal units, assembling themselves out of appropriated words and phrases in a discontinuous, yet interdependent manner. And all of this occurs without Giorno ever needing to identify himself as a “Buddhist poet.”

#### NOTES

1. Coe, 1994.
2. Leyland, ed., 1978 and 1998.
3. Johnson and Paulenich, eds., 1991; Schelling, ed., 2005.
4. “His technique, which has developed considerably in the past decade, consists of chopping apart a prose sentence, so that its words are repeated in different linear arrangements, with different line-breaks, and then duplicated in adjacent columns . . . . All this technique notwithstanding, Giorno’s work is built not upon isolated words but upon whole phrases; it depends for coherence not upon sound but syntax, semantics and prose narrative—all the traditional baggage—to evoke his macabre vision . . . to be precise, this is not text-sound art at all, but inventively amplified poetry . . .” Kostelanetz, 1981, 193–195. See also Zurbrugg.
5. Giorno, 1973, 54–55.

6. See Daumal's *Rasa, or Knowledge of the Self*, Artaud's "Letter to the Buddhist Schools" and Bataille's "Method of Meditation," for example.

7. Giorno's interest in drugs relates to these issues. Drugs arose in the Western mind in the nineteenth century as a response to the gradual destabilization of traditional notions of transcendence, which among other things, also served as guarantors of artistic inspiration. At the same time, the experience of mind-altering drugs further served to destabilize such traditional categories, raising further questions as to the nature of mind and universe, leading to a search for alternative ways of understanding what was experienced while under the influence of drugs—and practices that might help the drug user negotiate the unstable fluxes of an intoxicated mind. Giorno notes that his own interest in meditation was a product of taking LSD with Leary and others in New York in the early 1960s.

8. Schwab's *Oriental Renaissance* relates this history until the end of the nineteenth century, which is precisely the moment when European and American writers began study and practice with Asian teachers. My own broader research project involves documenting the history of literary engagement with Asian religions in the twentieth century, focusing on this issue of practice.

9. See Vishwanathan, 1998.

10. Giorno, 1970, 171.

11. See Fields, 273–338.

12. For an overview of the Beats relationship to Buddhism, see Tonkinson, 1995.

13. For an introduction to the idea of the mandala, see Snellgrove, 1987, Vol. 1, 198–212. See also Leidy, 1997 and Brauen, 1998 for overviews of the topic.

14. My understanding of emptiness is based on readings of the great Indian Mahayana Buddhist teachers Nagarjuna, in his *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way (Mulamadhyamakakarika)* and Chandrakirti, in his *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakavatara)* as well as the great Tibetan master Tsongkhapa's exposition of Madhyamika philosophy in his *Great Exposition of the Stages of the Path (Lam Rim Chenmo)*, as well as oral teachings by H. H. the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche.

15. See Giorno, 1994 for some of Giorno's poems from this period.

16. Leyland, 1998, 275.

17. Giorno, 1973, intro.

18. Giorno, 1977, 45–46.

19. Giorno, 1977, 46–47.

20. See Dudjom Rinpoche's *The Nyingma School of Tibetan Buddhism: its Fundamentals and History* (1991) for details on the Nyingma tradition.

21. See Gyatso and Tulku Thondup on tertons and the *terma* tradition within the Nyingma schools.

22. See for example Evans-Wentz, ed., *Tibet's Great Yogi Milarepa*, 155–156 and 194. The classical description of the tumo practice can be found in *The Six Yogas of Naropa*.

23. See Kahn, 1999, on the history of sound in the twentieth-century avant-gardes. On sound in Asian religious thought, see Khan, 1996, and Sullivan, ed., 1997. Also discussion in Berendt's *Nada Brahma: The World is Sound* and Peter Hamel's *Through Music to the Self*.

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# 4

## Buddhadharma and Poetry without Credentials

MICHAEL HELLER

*for Nathaniel Tarn*

I'm here as a poet and a student, writing about the interrelationship of Buddhist practice and poetry. For me this practice of poetry does not mean an exotic use of Buddhist terms to enlard a poem, nor do I mean to suggest anything of an inspirational nature. And yet, to take up poetry, whether as reader or poet, is, in a sense, to take up a path. What kind of path? Such a question cannot be answered in any doctrinaire or even evaluative way. However, for the practitioner/poet in search of his or her "poetics," both Buddhist and non-Buddhist literary and philosophical traditions, their resonances and pointings, can be seen as directional forces. I want to outline some of these forces. Allen Ginsberg sets the tone for such an exploration with his comment that:

It's an old tradition in the West among great poets that poetry is rarely thought of as 'just poetry.' Real poetry practitioners are practitioners of mind awareness, or practitioners of reality, expressing their fascination with a phenomenal universe and trying to penetrate to the heart of it. Poetics isn't mere picturesque diletantism or egotistical

expressionism. . . . Classical poetry is a ‘process’ or experiment—a probe into the nature of reality and the nature of the mind. (BASM 94)

Indeed, said this way, poetry and a Buddhist outlook or perspective seem nearly identical.

My own way into Buddhist practice came by circuitous routes, experimental probes, intellectual influences, readings, study, and finally a “meeting of the minds” with a teacher. I want to write here neither a personal history nor a how-to manual of involvement. But if a path is inexplicably “personal,” it also has its sidereal value as reference point for another. Shelley’s perhaps grandiose proclamation that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” as well as Ginsberg’s sense of poets as “practitioners of mind-awareness, or practitioners of reality,” reminds us of poetry’s possibly active role in the world. And poetic traditions and the materials of individual poetics form a record of mind-awarenesses, an arena of active thought to be explored and considered. As Shitou Xiqian (700-790) exclaims in *Song of the Grass Roof Hermitage* (200–290 C.E.): “Thousands of words, myriad interpretations/are only to free you from obstructions” (72). So this writing is, modestly, only one of a myriad, written in the hope of first freeing myself and maybe other readers from obstruction.

For me, one influential approach to laying out the contours of thinking about art from a Buddhist perspective is contained in Herbert V. Guenther’s commentary on the *The Royal Song of Saraha*, a study of the Indian “king *Dohas*,” poem-songs written and performed under the influence of Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism. For Guenther, the role of the Buddhist-inflected arts are ethical and moral but also philosophically fundamental to human interaction. His book *The Tantric View of Life*, published shortly after his study of Saraha and deeply influenced by his readings of Saraha’s *Dohas*, is a meditation on the near synonymy of art and Vajrayana Buddhism. Guenther’s discussion in the book is extremely complex, worthy of the close study by artists, Buddhist-oriented or not. What I would emphasize here is that for Guenther, “aesthetic experience” is *the* central aspect of Vajrayana practice, its ground, path, and goal (TVL 29), deeply entwined in the Mahayana aims of compassion and liberation. According to Guenther in his study of Saraha, the royal song, the *Doha*, is a gateway, an opening onto Buddhahood, “the path by which we see what is otherwise not seen” (RSOS 22). “The pictorial, emotional and cognitive meanings, all of which are present in poetry and song . . . may be said to bring into the open all that we then discuss and deal with in everyday language” (RSOS 24). In other words, as Guenther describes it, “the poet’s expression is the formulation of his knowledge of sensuous, mental, and emotional life, and it is this

knowledge that he presents for our contemplation” (RSOS 25). “The image in its immediacy,” he says—here sounding very much like Ezra Pound in his most Imagist phase—“is a moment of original vision full of suggestions rather than comprehension . . . It invites us to explore the depth. Thereby a transition from sensuous concretizations to inner feelings of spirituality is effected. The spiritual is discovered as a ‘path’ stretched out before our eyes to a distant goal and yet grounded in ourselves; it is not a spurious addition” (RSOS 25, 26).

Guenther worked closely with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (the Tibetan Buddhist teacher with whom I was later to study), especially on their collaborative book, *The Dawn of Tantra*, a work that, like *The Royal Song of Saraha*, emphasizes the aesthetic aspect of the Vajrayana outlook. But it was some years before I encountered Trungpa that I was led to Guenther’s writings by my readings in Western phenomenology, in particular, the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, not only his great studies of perception as in *The Phenomenology of Perception* but also his writing on art. Merleau-Ponty’s work had already had an impact on American poetry and art, especially through the writings and teachings of Charles Olson, whose poetry and influential essay “Projective Verse” had profoundly affected his students and colleagues such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Merce Cunningham, and Robert Rauschenberg at Black Mountain College, the small experimental school that became one of the founding homes of mid-century American modernism. Olson’s copy of Merleau-Ponty’s *The Visible and the Invisible* was said to be the most marked-up book in his library. Among the essays of Merleau-Ponty that influenced me, “Cézanne’s Doubt” stands out as a particularly Buddhist piece of writing, in effect a bridge work between the traditions. For one thing, Merleau-Ponty describes Cézanne’s approach to his own art as a kind of *via negativa*, Cézanne’s way of attempting to discover, to use Guenther’s words above, a “moment of original vision,” working back through his perceptions and his understandings of the traditions of art to arrive at a depiction of what is actually before him. As well, it is important to remember that Cézanne is an exemplary figure not only for modern and contemporary painting, but also, in his work and thought, a magnetic force for poets as diverse as Rilke and Stevens.

For Merleau-Ponty, “the painter who conceptualizes and seeks the expression first misses the mystery—renewed every time we look at someone—of a person’s appearing in nature” (MP 16). Preconceptions are viewed by both painter and philosopher as a kind of “heresy” to the understanding, getting in the way of both intellectual and sensory “truth.” Merleau-Ponty quotes Cézanne’s remark that “the painter’s ‘conception’ cannot precede ‘execution’” (MP 19). Cézanne’s efforts can be understood

as a kind of applied phenomenology, at least as it is formulated by Husserl and later Merleau-Ponty, a mode of painting that attempts to see the world for what it is. From the Buddhist perspective, such an act of painting is a kind of undoing or unmasking. Merleau-Ponty's description of Cézanne as an artist resonates with the Buddhist notions of mindfulness and awareness, of one who refuses the comforts of conceptualizations and of any *a priori* understanding of experience. Cézanne sits before a landscape or a face to be painted somewhat as a student on his cushion, without hope or expectation. Thus, unlike other painters who have given themselves over to a style or a preexisting tradition, Cézanne, according to Merleau-Ponty, formulates his task in a wholly original way, to paint "as if no one had ever painted before" (MP 19). This originality is the product of the painter's effort to discover meaning within the lived opacity of our condition, the "silent and solitary experience," as Merleau-Ponty calls it, of one's own relation to the world. Cézanne, the philosopher insists, lives in the knowledge that "the meaning of what a work of art is going to say *does not exist* anywhere—not in things, which have yet no meaning nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life" (MP 19).

The connection to poetry (as to other arts) is obvious. Poetry, the conventional formula goes, is a "raid on the inarticulate," a raid the outcome of which is to produce an articulation of that which was previously inarticulate that is, to produce something otherwise not said. Art, including poetry, is here a kind of Heideggerian "dis-closure," not a repository of truths so much as a ground from which the way things are is to be discerned. For an American poet, such thoughts are in consonance with Walt Whitman's charge to American poets in his 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* to let "nothing hang in the way, not the richest curtain" (14). Poetic traditions were, in Whitman's thinking, to be desanctified and reexamined in the light of present circumstances.

The Buddhist sense of this, based in a nonessentialist approach to experience, is both clear and perhaps also a bit more complex, since Buddhist thinking is based on the intuitions and discoveries in practice rather than on the abstracted categories of philosophizing alone. The poet Nathaniel Tarn, in his essay "Newly Saying The Already Said," an homage to the Japanese Buddhist philosopher Keiji Nishitani and his book *Religion and Nothingness*, gives what amounts to a nuanced echo of both Cézanne and Merleau-Ponty, one inflected by his own years of Buddhist practice and study. "But it has been my habit," he writes, "to think of reality this way: as what is left after everyone else has had his ploy and his play and gone home for the day" (VWM 214). The poet's reality stems from the unsaid, from what may remain after conventional language (the "ploys" and "plays" of

others) have conventionally used up the world. In this sense, poetry's belatedness after the ploys and plays is a mark not of its primal barbarity but of its ever sensitivity and sophistication regarding the traditions which have come before. Tarn here echoes one of Cézanne's most famous remarks that the way back to nature was "through the Louvre," that the ground of an artist's quest was also the undoing of art's overlay of conventions and styles.

Conventions, styles, old habits. These constitute part of the material with which the poet works and works through. With respect to Buddhist thought, a potential poetics can be inferred, one which is synonymous with the workings and intentions of modern and contemporary poets. For from the Buddhist poet's perspective, those conventions and styles, each with their champions and justifications, are also, in a way, part of the canons of passion, ignorance and aggression, and also therefore sources of confusion and obscurations of the mind.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, my teacher, stated that "in all Buddhist teachings, the mind constantly lives in bewilderment and ignorance. Dharmas are the living teachings of clarity appearing spontaneously in all sorts of life situations." Buddhist "faith," he says, "is the readiness to expose whatever is concealed" (*CTSM* 6). Guenther speaks of "Buddha intentionality," of the "evaluative cognition of the factual realm," of Buddha as "felt knowledge" (*RSOS* 22). In the poetic transformation enacted by the *Dohas*, "the outward image becomes the symbol for an inward process, not its explanation" (*RSOS* 25). Imagine a career in poetry, imagine poem after poem as a series of unconcealments, as revelatory symbols of the poet's inward process. Words become the medium in which the poet unmask self, his or her culture, and, indeed, comes thereby to know and understand both self and culture better. Poetry can be seen as the linguistic attempt over time to enact the Four Dharmas of Gampopa (a ritual chant, here translated by Trungpa, used in meditation to stabilize the mind):

Grant your blessings so that my mind may be one with the dharma.

Grant your blessings so that dharma may progress along the path.

Grant your blessings so that the path may clarify confusion.

Grant your blessings so that confusion may dawn as wisdom. (*SOM* 18).

Gampopa (1079–1153 B.C.E.), the most central figure after the Buddha in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, Trungpa's own lineage, is especially valued for his unifying of the monastic and yogic traditions of Buddhist practice. The Four Dharmas invoke, in extremely condensed form, the path to liberation or enlightenment. Guenther, in another collaborative effort with Trungpa, translated and annotated Gampopa's *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, one of Tibetan Buddhism's foundational works.

I was educated in the sciences and technical subjects, graduating with an engineering degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. More than anything else, I loved the precise language of scientific and technological discoveries. Such a language, it was clear, seemed to carve moments of clarity out of formlessness and confusion. As I have written elsewhere, I came to see that at their most elevated horizons, so to speak, the attitude of both science and poetry were deeply embedded in a sense of awe; that the poet's reaching for the world through language was not at all dissimilar to the scientist with his eye at the reticule of the telescope attempting to comprehend the cosmos (*LR* 74–77). Later, when I had decided to try to be a poet, Pound's insistence that poetry was "the science of the emotions" became for me a kind of motto, a deeply appealing rubric. In this regard, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Buddhist tantra as described by Guenther seemed to promise such a "science," a richness and complexity of thought, one that had a bearing on the kind of poetry I hoped to write.

My early thrashings-about as a young poet were vague attempts at understanding my own state of mind, at objectifying them sufficiently that they might be a kind of teaching for me. These attempts were also cluttered with ideas about form, poetic stance, the role of the poet, all kinds of self-imposed external criteria that modified or obstructed the objectifications I sought. I sense that poetry began for me then, in the awareness of that very confusion Gampopa refers to: an awareness which is primary, the birth-bed of a first glimpse that one *is* confused. In fact, later, as I began to study and practice in the dharma, I sensed that those early moments in poetry were for me not unlike the first moments of sitting meditation when one realizes if only for an instant—the necessary instant—that he has moved from the impelling current of engrossed thought to the gap that ushers in some distance and clarity.

Clearly, that distance, that clarity is connected to the insight latent in Guenther's notion of how the poetic image provides us with a "moment of original vision." This is not to mistake meditational insight for poetry but to recognize that the contemplative model and the poetic model might have some useful similarities. Trungpa, in *The Myth of Freedom*, speaks of the awareness achieved in meditation in terms of "recognition" and "recollection" (*MOF* 50). These are apt terms for a poet's work. "Recognition" implies a glimpse into the nature of things, seeing how the world works, and for a poet this means translating one's recognitions into a kind of witnessing. For in a sense, the poet is one who is willing to bear witness thoroughly and completely, of himself and of the world.

I take the Buddhist understanding of bearing witness to be something like Trungpa's description of the "Lion's Roar," a willingness to fearlessly

proclaim that “any state of mind, including the emotions, is a workable situation” (MOF 69). “Workable” means that one may bear witness to the misunderstandings or neurotic aspects of one’s mind as the material of the path. Trungpa speaks of “transmutation” as an aspect of this “lion’s roar,” as though the notion of workability were itself an alchemical process. From the point of view of the poem, however, workability implies communication and transmissibility, a sense that the poet’s job is not so much to express him- or herself as it is to clarify and make available one’s experience via language. Experience and communication, the materials of poetry, suggest from a Buddhist perspective a further characteristic: communication (and by implication, poetry) has the quality of soliciting a judgment about itself, of opening that judgment to inspection. Along with this willingness to say how things are is an implied outlook—not a heavy-handed judgment against the world, but a suggestion as to why the work of art is closer to reality than the conventional notions of experience.

The dynamic by which a work of art moves us is no more than this undermining of the solidified character of our usual worldviews; in this, art can have the sharpness of *prajna*, the Sanskrit term for discriminating awareness or perfecting of insight that is wielded like a sword, slashing through one’s habitual preconceptions about reality. Thus understood, communication is more than information; it is, in a curious way, an attempt to set things right, perhaps even further, an affirmation that things can be seen properly. The truth of communication, in this sense, is creative. It has no bias because it has sprung from an actual lived world, unconditioned by any *a priori* rigidity, and continually it undercuts the conventionalized constructs and arrangements of our normal thought patterns. Art introduces uncertainty into our view of things, and communication and uncertainty are indissolubly wed in authentic art. A confirmation of our existing world views in art resembles nostalgia, a redundant and sentimental view of life: the stuff of soap opera, pulp fiction, and their fashionable introversions that go by the term of decadence. For the artist or poet, as for the Buddhist practitioner, the only injunction seems to be, “wake up!”

In my view, then, Buddhist thinking does not dictate a poetics. Rather, it suggests, broadly, an openness to experience, intelligence, and self-awareness. Even Ginsberg’s principles of spontaneous composition, his “first thought, best thought” slogan, borrowed from Trungpa’s teachings, are always in danger of being turned into hardened, doctrinaire attitudes about what constitutes valuable poetry. Communication remains conventional only to the extent that the writer or reader refuses to acknowledge its full character, and instead allows what has occurred—singular though it must be—to be made to conform to existing patterns of thought; in

short, one has refused to risk looking at the actual textures and forms of an experience.

The poet George Oppen spoke of his own poetry as enacting a sequence of disclosure, “a process of thought, [a] process of perception” (POA 208). The words on the page were not meant to simply build a clever or even a beautiful image; for him, the image was investigative, interrogating reality as it went along. In his poetic sequence *Of Being Numerous*, he writes:

Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful thing in the world,  
A limited, limiting clarity  
I have not and never did have any motive of poetry  
But to achieve clarity (NCP 193)

Poetry, according to Oppen, is rooted in recognition and receptivity, an acceptance of our state of mind as it is, rather than in some abstract idea of what we think poetry ought to be or in the notion that poetry is an activity that will get us to some goal. The poet’s job was to develop and cultivate such a stance, to be receptive, as he called it, to a “philosophy of the astonished” (POA 203). For me, Oppen’s “motive of poetry . . . clarity,” as it embodies a mindfulness toward, perception, culture, and human psychology, has many of the attributes of a Buddhist practice.

Trungpa sees such a stance in a somewhat different manner. For him, what is important is right speech or perfect communication, one of the characteristics of the Eightfold Path of Buddhist practice. Speech here, taken from the Sanskrit *vac*, which means “utterance,” “word,” or “logos,” must be considered broadly as any sort of linguistic expression including that of poetry. The term “right” is not a moralistic or censoring idea but, as Trungpa says in *The Myth of Freedom*, true speech, being true (MOF 95–96).

Poets don’t write to teach, yet it does seem obvious that the poet inclined toward a Buddhist disposition is aware that what he or she writes is a kind of teaching, a sense that the poems one writes will affect others, and therefore have an ethical dimension. What this may also mean, then, is that the old role of bohemian poet, isolated and estranged from society, is no longer applicable. Buddhist thought implicitly posits the poet and his work in a social setting, in a social role; taken seriously, such thought will determine the actions and tactics of the poet *qua* poet.

After years of self-scrutiny, the poet Bashō, the great Japanese haiku master, writes:

What is important is to keep our mind high in the world of true understanding, and returning to the world of our daily experience to seek therein the truth of beauty. No matter what we may be doing at a given

moment, we must not forget that it has a bearing upon our everlasting self which is poetry. (*Bashō* 28)

Bashō's thought might be paraphrased as follows: we can say to ourselves that, yes, there is this mind's life, this actual world I am in, and there are also all my hopes and fears that are synonymous with it, are fantasies generated by it, which comprise my "daily experience," and yet there is still my intention to close the gap between our experience and "true understanding." This gap, it is clear to Bashō, can only be traversed across the poetic act. Bashō's most well-known haiku, translated by Kenneth Rexroth, reads:

An old pond—  
The sound  
Of a diving frog. (115)

Reading this poem in a Buddhist context, D.T. Suzuki, in a passage from *Zen and Japanese Culture*, quotes R.H. Blyth, an authority on the study of haiku, as follows: "a haiku is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things." Suzuki then comments: "Whether 'temporary' or not, Bashō gives in his seventeen syllables a significant intuition into Reality" (*ZJC* 228–229). Meditating on the haiku above, Suzuki goes on to say: "This sound coming out of the old pond was heard by Bashō as filling the entire universe. Not only was the totality of the environment absorbed in the sound and vanished into it, but Bashō himself was altogether effaced from his consciousness. Both the subject and the object, *en-soi* and *pour-soi*, ceased to be something confronting an independent I. And yet this could not be a state of absolute annihilation. Bashō was there, the old pond was there, with all the rest. But Bashō was no more the old Bashō" (*ZJC* 228–229). For Bashō, then, the identity between an awakened mind and poetry is inescapable: "our everlasting self," the always already, operative condition of being, is "poetry." Bashō is testifying to the sense that from the Buddhist perspective of impermanence, the mind's capacity to momentarily arrest transitory phenomena, to capture it in language or art is at the very core of what it means to be human.

Poetry, then, with all its depth and yet with all its as-if and illusionistic power, is synonymous for Bashō with "true understanding." Obviously, he was thinking of his own discipline, the haiku or his marvelous prose narratives, which capture the transitory beauty of the world with the merest flicker of syntax. Such a discipline emulates, once one begins to practice, how one recognizes the mind and self, thought by thought (those "temporary enlightenments" described by Blyth), moment by moment, at once real and unreal, substantial and insubstantial.

Norman Fischer, a Zen priest and poet, examines this situation in another way: “meditation and poetry are ways of being honest with ourselves” (*BASM* 66). Fischer’s words remind us of the painful revelations and internal confrontations that occur on the meditative path or in the practice of poetry. They are acts of self-exposure, powerful, and often unpleasant. Such “unmasking,” as Trungpa calls it, “is a violent eruption” (*CTSM* 8), at times very much like the strong epiphany or visionary moment of the poem. Probing into the nature of mind and relating to one’s emotional state with honesty are synonymous with the openness and mindfulness of practice; they cultivate an attitude or stance toward one’s making art, whether it be painting or music or poetry, they are instances of what, Trungpa called “meditation in action.” This is what the great teachers have taught and what art itself has taught when it is not “just art” or “merely” art.

Which brings us to ask, in a Buddhist context, what is poetry?

In ninth century China, about the time that Tu Fu and other poets worked in the bureaucracy, the labels “artistic” for poetry and “practical” for prose existed in a particularly dramatic way. The fact was that in China, prose was considered an unfit medium for anything but the transmission of facts or the carrying out of minor business matters. Poetry, on the other hand, was the medium for consideration of the *dao* of government, for serious thought, for generals to inspire their armies with, for the bureaucrat/poets to inform and persuade the Emperor. In this sense, poetry was not a diversion from the ongoing business of the day, but a way of entering into its deepest levels. Steven Owen in *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics* develops this point in a more fundamental manner. “For Tu Fu’s reader,” he writes, “meaning is subtly infused in the particular forms of the world perceived and uncertain, perhaps, even to the poet: the poem raises up portentous forms, and in doing so, tells you about both world and the inner concerns of the poet” (*TCPP* 16). In other words, it is not unreasonable for a poet to see, in his own poetry, “inner concerns” that could not have come to him or her any other way, which is to see in poetry its potential as a teaching, not so much for readers as for the poet who has written it. In this context, Suzuki, speaking above of a Bashō who is “no longer the old Bashō,” reminds us of one of the older formulations of poetic dynamics, of the poem’s ability to alter consciousness. Guenther, in *The Tantric View of Life*, quotes from Gampopa’s writings on Mahayana and Mahamudra doctrines in words that may say it most Buddhistically and most simply: “Understand appearance to be the teacher” (*TVL* 30).

For an American poet, Gampopa’s “understand appearance” has a powerful resonance. It echoes back to Pound’s “Imagist Dos and Don’ts,” specifically Pound’s injunction that “the natural object is always the adequate

symbol" (*LE* 5). Pound's "always" strikes with almost as much force as Gampopa's "understand," as though visual perception, by its very undeniability, were the moral outline of Vision with a capital V. Indeed, one might usefully speculate that any number of American poets in the Pound-Williams lineage have been drawn to Buddhist thought precisely because such an idea as Gampopa's (an idea that richly infuses all sorts of other Buddhist thinking) subliminally reminds them of the Imagist legacy at the root of twentieth-century poetry. Let us recall that Imagism itself is already deeply inflected by Eastern thought beginning with Arthur Waley or with Ernest Fenollosa's treatise on *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, which had such a profound impact on Pound. Pound acquired the manuscript version of this essay from Fenollosa's widow and edited it for eventual publication in the form we now have. In fact, among literary scholars and poets, we mostly know of Fenollosa through Pound's promotion of Fenollosa's work. But thereby hangs a tale.

Rick Fields tells it in *How The Swans Came To The Lake*, his marvelous study of Buddhism in America. He reminds us that "it was Buddhism that Fenollosa identified as the new genius of Eastern civilization" (*HSCL* 165), but that in the literary sphere this Buddhistic side of Fenollosa has for the most part been neglected due to Pound's sympathies with the Confucian aspect of Chinese culture. "By the time of the *Cantos* [Pound's epic poem, fifty years in the making]," Fields writes, "Pound had turned Fenollosa's version of Chinese history completely around. It was Confucius who represented the highest of Chinese civilization, while Buddhists—now called 'Buddhs' in that slurring ethnic shorthand of the *Cantos*—came to stand for the enemy" (*HSCL* 165). Yet this Buddhist outlook pervading Fenollosa's thought cannot be disentangled from Pound's use of his work. And thus Pound, with his deep interests in Fenollosa, in Chinese and Japanese poetry, with *hokku* and *Noh* drama and with Vorticism and the ideogrammatic method, can be seen in retrospect as creating a permissive—even deeply inviting—aesthetic atmosphere for Buddhist thought and for Buddhist-inflected poetry. (And there is so much more here to be thought through from Rexroth to Lucien Stryk's haikus.)

Trungpa's teachings, the Buddhist roots of which go back to the Kagyu Karmapas and Gampopa, can be seen as especially magnetic works for American poets: Ginsberg, of course, Anne Waldman, and all the post-Beat disembodied poets of the Naropa Institute. Among such a gathering I would have to include myself and Armand Schwerner, poets who brought with them into this particular fold, the thought of the Objectivists such as George Oppen, Carl Rakosi and Charles Reznikoff—not Buddhists by any stretch of the imagination, but poets who enacted in their work and thought

an ethical reevaluation of Imagism. In addition, one would want to include as environing influence the work of Cid Corman, poet and early publisher of poets such as Zukofsky and Olson, whose translations of Bashō and other Buddhist-inclined poets were to be found in the pages of his pathbreaking magazine *Origin*. Corman, who spent most of his working life in Kyoto, was a true bridge-figure between East and West. His translation of Bashō's *Back Roads to Far Countries*, published in the early 1970s, remains one of the seminal crossover works in the dialogue between Buddhist thought and American poetry. All of the above (and many others certainly) can be said to have participated in an indirect confluence of Pound's thought and Buddhist ideas about art and poetry. This is a history yet to be fully written, but anthologies such as Kent Johnson's and Craig Paulenich's *Beneath A Single Moon* (Shambala, 1991) provide a useful snapshot of the situation.

Let me briefly illustrate by way of some personal observations the complexities of the interactions embodied in the history mentioned above. Although Trungpa was my spiritual guide, it was George Oppen, whom I met in the late 1960s, who was my poetic guru. I took Oppen's book of poems *This In Which* on my expatriate *hegira* to Spain in the 1960s (UP 190–194). The book had as its epigraph Heidegger's phrase, "the third way: the arduous path of appearance." Oppen read deeply in Heidegger and made use of his thought in developing his own poetics, one that was resistant to dogma and preconceived ideas of what poetry ought to be. (See the numerous references to the philosopher in Oppen's *Selected Letters*.) His example had a powerful impact on me. Heidegger explores Buddhist modes of thinking, especially about art and language, in *On the Way to Thinking*. And it is Oppen, foremost among the Objectivists, who seems to use Heideggerian thought in his critique of Imagism, in the sense that he is seeking a more rigorous and philosophically grounded sense of "appearance" as a way of distinguishing his practice from the more "literary" uses, as Oppen saw it, of Imagism in the work of T. E. Hulme or Amy Lowell.

Further, Oppen, in both his poetry and in his correspondence with me and others, constantly stressed his own search for a poetics free of dogma and *a priori* views of poetry. When I began to study Buddhist thought seriously and was exposed to notions such as *sunyata*, nontheistic and nonessentialist thinking, emphasized in Trungpa's writings and personal teachings, I felt then a sense of a poetry without credentials, of the activity of making poetry as a kind of path or at least a reinforcing of the path I had set out upon. I mention these facts primarily to point out what I see as a sort of circular, even recursive path of influences, atmospherics, and receptivity.

"The desire of the poet," says the late Louis Zukofsky in his Objectivist manifesto "An Objective," "is not to show himself but to show his

world" (P 15). If we are to enter our worlds, *poetry*, as Bashō proclaimed, must inevitably arise (i.e., as a ground of being). To repeat from Bashō's statement above:

No matter what we may be doing at a given moment,  
we must not forget that it has a bearing upon our everlasting self  
which is poetry.

There is something movingly unequivocal in this statement, uncompromising in some fundamental way. Our life, Bashō insists, is poetry. He is not talking about some category or class of people who write poems; rather, he is talking about the very basis of our existence. In suggesting that, whatever we are doing, we *are* in a sense, poetry, he is implying that the label of "poet" with its freight of self-conceptions and imposed criteria (at least as the public conception of poetry has evolved in the present), is unnecessary. Bashō, I think, would want us to regard the poet not as a purely literary figure but rather as someone who essentially works without such credentials, who maintains an awareness toward states of mind and intentions, his own and others. Such a poet would seek an even larger or broader context for poetry, something implicit in Wittgenstein's well-known remark that "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" (N 50). In this context, the question "what is poetry?" seems like a secondary question. Or it might, with some sense of humor, which is the same thing, become a question one imagines Bashō asking: "what is not poetry?"

The great German Romantic poet Hölderlin, as Heidegger interprets him, comes at Bashō's question from another direction. Heidegger has often referred to Hölderlin as the "poet of poetry," the poet who seeks to understand what it means to write poetry. And indeed, Heidegger has placed Hölderlin at the center of his philosophical meditations. In his essay entitled "The Nature of Language," he cites from Hölderlin's hymn, "Celebration of Peace," this passage: "since we have been a discourse and have heard from one another . . ." (OWTL 78). Heidegger sees in these lines that, for the poet, the distinctions between poetry and communication are artificial, that "song is not the opposite of discourse, but rather [has] the most intimate kinship with it; for song, too, is language" (OTWL 78). Following on Heidegger's thought, I would suggest that the word "since" at the beginning of the fragment, suggests that what we have previously seen as an intention (to write poetry) has about it, as Hölderlin's words imply, the character of necessity, that something we might identify as poetry is always at the base of language and thought. Heidegger, in his essay ". . . Poetically Man Dwells . . .," also based on some lines of Hölderlin, reflects, like Bashō, on the nature of language. In responding to Hölderlin's lines, the

philosopher seeks to place poetic language at the core of human existence. It is not simply that poetry can be something literary, written about where one dwells, for example, but rather that, as Heidegger insists, “poetry first causes dwelling to be dwelling. Poetry is what really lets us dwell” (*PLT* 215). Heidegger suggests that our being lies in the very ground of expression, of our need to resort to language and hence to poetry: “the responding in which man authentically listens to the appeal of language is that which speaks in the element of poetry” (*PLT* 216). It is this “responding,” Heidegger insists, that defines humanity. What Heidegger says, via Hölderlin’s words, seems as unequivocal as Bashō’s words above. The individual is “the one who dwells poetically,” who bears witness to being through poetry and language. Bashō and Hölderlin meet in the idea that there is a need to express, to witness, that the ground of our lives *is* poetry, and is, therefore, expressible.

Trungpa liked to use the phrase “buddhadharma without credentials,” the need to give up ego’s “trip,” our “spiritual materialism” as he called it, in pursuance of the path. “Spiritual materialism” manifests itself at all points on the path as a kind of clinging to one’s role as seeker, as participant in “holy” or “sacred” activities, as someone elevated by the spiritual quest. And some years ago, borrowing from Trungpa’s thought, I wrote an essay entitled “Poetry Without Credentials,” about poetry’s power to alter consciousness, to lead us away from our habits of mind and our certainties and toward uncertainty and openness and with a friendliness toward ourselves. In that essay, I was also concerned with the interference to writing created by the credentialing roles of such terms as “poet” and “poetry,” about how our preconceptions concerning such terms might actually work against the possibility of making poetry. To understand such things would not lead us toward a Buddhist poetry. Indeed, maybe it would not lead us to poetry at all. But it would lead us perhaps to being more human, to recognizing our human state. Art influenced by Buddhist practice—perhaps better to say by a practitioner—would be a mindful art, an art probing reality, most importantly, an art in honest relation to its maker and perhaps even to its audience. I don’t think we can find a formula for this, but rather we can imagine that whatever state of mind achieved in practice is entwined around or shines forth in one’s work. And then a term like “Buddhist art” would be a redundancy.

From the perspective of a practitioner, there is nothing really to advocate or suggest to an artist or to anyone. We come to study and practice with a teacher not because we want to improve our art, but, as the literature puts it, because we are nauseated with samsara, with our neurotic habits and egos, or because we have the hunger for spiritual meaning. (It is

up to each of us to pick the right words for ourselves.) So someone enters on this path of practice and study and, as he or she so desires, brings the understandings and clarity derived from practice to the making of their art. I repeat here the last section of that paper because couched in a non-esoteric language, it nevertheless invokes what I believe to be the teaching power of poetry:

#### POETRY WITHOUT CREDENTIALS

*If we look closely at the effects strong poems have on us, we may discover something quite strange. The poem 'alters consciousness' it is said; it shakes up and disrupts our certainties. We could say it introduces uncertainty where perhaps there was none before. New truths, new conceptions of world or life are tendered by the poem. Yet we return again and again to the poem to find ourselves shaken up. What is curious about powerful poetry, what is profound about it, is not the conceptions of truth offered but the disruption, the actual opening and experiencing of what is when the conceptions have been torn away.*

*In the moment of that happening, everything we are has a bearing—our experience has led us here—and is also beside the point. The only thing which has meaning is the uncertainty; our attempt to maintain a grasp on the solidity of our views has been undermined.*

*How strange! What is actually true is not the certainty but the uncertainty. If we are willing to recognize that moment, to live thoroughly in that understanding, we recognize that it is just as we give up our views and our values, give up ourselves and our credentials that poetry takes place.*

*This is what we mean by poetry without credentials. (UP 188, 189)*

And from a Buddhist perspective, this is what we might mean by buddhadharma without credentials. It strikes me that this is the given ground prepared by both poetic and spiritual forbearers. American poetry has already moved along a very promising path; the "circuitous routes" of other poets similar to the ones I have followed are full of both promise and, even more important, openness and workability.

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PART II

Zen, Vajrayana,  
and the Avante-Garde

*A Pluralistic Poetics*

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# 5

## Finger Pointing at the Moon

### *Zen and the Poetry of Philip Whalen*

JANE FALK

Philip Whalen holds a unique place in modern American poetry. Best known as one of the original members of the Beat Movement, as a Zen Buddhist he also enacted the traditional role of poet-priest. However, even before Whalen entered formal practice in the 1970s, he had been linked to Zen by fellow poets and critics. Allen Ginsberg, for example, describes Whalen in 1955 at the seminal Six Gallery poetry reading in San Francisco as “a strange fat young man from Oregon—in appearance a Zen Buddhist *bodhisattva*,” who read poetry “written in rare post-Poundian assemblages of blocks of hard images set in juxtapositions, like haikus.”<sup>1</sup> Whalen was also included in the summer 1958 Zen issue of the *Chicago Review* with Gary Snyder, D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Jack Kerouac, among others. Unlike fellow poet Gary Snyder, however, he did not participate in traditional Zen practice under a teacher at this time, but gained his understanding of Zen from books and friends. How did Zen inform Whalen’s poetry, and how did his use of Zen change over time?

#### IN SEARCH OF “REAL SELF”

Whalen’s early interest in Zen can be seen as proof of his avant-garde status and as a way of distancing himself from identities available to mainstream American writers in the 1950s, as well as a means by which to access what he

called “Real self.” One might even contend that Whalen’s allusions to Zen in his early poetry were appropriative, during a time when Zen was a popular force in American culture especially among avant-garde artists and poets. A shift occurs both in purpose and emphasis in Whalen’s poetry from the 1950s to the 1970s, however, when his formal practice begins, and he is ordained as a monk at the San Francisco Zen Center. Poetry becomes for Whalen an expression of his practice and a way to encourage others (implying the Buddhist concept of *upaya* or skillful means by which bodhisattvas or enlightened ones strive to use all possible means to bring others to enlightenment).<sup>2</sup> This shift is paralleled by a second one in emphasis and content, from more direct allusions to Zen in earlier poems to more subtle and less specific allusions later: poetry as practice versus practice as poetry.

Explicating the title of one of his early poems, “The Slop Barrel: Slices of the Paideuma for All Sentient Beings,” is a way to understand Zen as part of his avant-garde project. Ostensibly this poem is about growing up and gaining knowledge; however, the way the title juxtaposes several kinds of language (colloquial, Greek, and Buddhist) demonstrates a new vocabulary for poetry. The poem also includes allusions to the Zen *kōan* and is a way to wake readers up to a “new comprehension” in the United States post–World War II when Eastern cultural values were gaining interest.<sup>3</sup>

A pertinent discussion of Whalen’s interest in Buddhism occurs in a letter of July 26, 1960, to Allen Ginsberg where he describes what the examples of Buddha, bodhisattvas, and Zen practitioners mean to him and that the real question for a Buddhist is *Waht [sic] am I doing?* The answer is to “eat that old, imaginary self each one of us imagines we ‘have’” in order to make way for the “Real self,” “our true identity,” which will act as an alternative to identities available to Americans in the 1950s. He hypothesizes that Ginsberg may not like the terms he is using, noting that he wants to find “new ones, make new stories, poems, metaphors of all this which you & anybody else WILL dig, so’s you can get started on the way to figuring out for yourself what you are, what is Heaven (or Enlightenment, or Real, or whatever).”<sup>4</sup>

Whalen’s method in writing poetry expressive of the “Real” also puts Western philosophical issues of perception, identity, consciousness, and language (what might be considered epistemological questions for a Eurocentric writer) into a Buddhist context using tenets, practices, scriptures, and literature associated with Zen.<sup>5</sup> As Whalen put it in a 1975 interview with Lee Bartlett, the ideas about Zen “began to find their way into the poetry.”<sup>6</sup> He often organizes his early poems around such questions, which also act as his personal *kōan* problems. Zen *kōan* practice usually involves a teacher giving a *kōan* or problem to a student to solve. The student must then provide an individual response found while meditating, as well as a capping

verse, which demonstrates the solution to the problem and the student's level of understanding.<sup>7</sup> In the process of writing the poem, Whalen works out an answer or response to his questions while simultaneously involving readers, his intent being to change perceptions about the nature of reality.

Whalen's statement of poetics in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry Anthology* that describes poetry as a "picture or graph of a mind moving" also recalls Zen and its practice of seated meditation: the practitioner sits silently, following the breath, aware of the mind's movement.<sup>8</sup> As Whalen adapts this practice to poetry, the content of the poem is the content of Whalen's mind or vice versa, recorded as he observes it, including the sounds and activities of the world around him as he writes. These reality bits might be considered the found text and found sound of his poems. His statement of poetics also demonstrates the Buddhist concept of *pratitya samutpada*, or "conditioned arising," the mutual conditioning of all things. This is best expressed in the Avatamsaka Sutra's teaching of interdependence and is symbolized by the Net of Indra in which each object in the universe is able to reflect and connect with all others.<sup>9</sup> In this way Whalen seeks to resolve the tensions he feels between inner and outer worlds, the investigation of which is a common thread in his poems and a way of presenting and understanding the "Real."

#### THE REED CONNECTION AND ZEN ROLE MODELS

To better gauge Whalen's early understanding of Zen, it is useful to look at his first encounters with Buddhism beginning in the 1940s and 1950s and the models he used as inspiration. His was a working-class background. Raised as a Christian Scientist in The Dalles, a small town in Oregon, Whalen went into the Army from 1943–1946, afterward attending Reed College on the GI Bill. There he met Gary Snyder who shared his discovery of R.H. Blyth's four-volume study of haiku and the writings of D.T. Suzuki with Whalen and fellow Reed student and poet, Lew Welch.<sup>10</sup> Once in the Bay Area after the Six Gallery reading, Whalen followed up his earlier interest in Zen by meeting Alan Watts and Albert Saijo. Although Whalen had already started the practice of sitting meditation on his own, Saijo taught Whalen and others how to sit with proper form and for longer periods of time at the informal zendo, Marin-an.<sup>11</sup> In addition, Whalen gained much information about Zen, its literature, practice, and the use of Zen accoutrements from correspondence with Snyder during the latter's stay in Japan 1956–1958 and again 1959–1964.

At this time, Whalen also modeled himself after the related roles of Chinese poet-scholar and poet-priest. The T'ang and Sung poets he chose

to emulate, such as Li Po, Po Chu-I, or Su Tung-po, were not only renowned poets, but were also interested in Daoism (the former) and Buddhism (the two latter), specifically Ch'an or Zen Buddhism. In addition, the lifestyle of Chinese poets would have appealed to Whalen with their fondness for drinking wine, reciting poetry with fellow poets, and appreciating nature. As Whalen put it in a 1991 interview, part of Zen's attraction was the fact that it "allowed people to be poets and painters—or at least I thought it did—these were acceptable creatures to be Buddhist practitioners. . . . You could be crazy and still be a Buddhist of some stripe or other."<sup>12</sup>

An example of Whalen's feeling of kinship with such poets occurs in a letter from Whalen to Snyder of August 7, 1954, in which he hypothesizes about his proposed stay in Newport, Oregon: "So maybe I shall be Marshal of Sui, or whatever it was Mr. Po did in the Provinces."<sup>13</sup> This probably alludes to Po Chu-I who was exiled because of poems written critical of the political regime of his day. By making this comparison, Whalen indirectly demonstrates his feeling of exile from American society by both his lifestyle's implicit and his poetry's explicit critique of middle-class attitudes toward work and money in the 1950s.

Whalen's poem of 1958, "Hymnus Ad Patrem Sinensis," translated as "Hymn to the Chinese Forefather," pays homage to and expresses his feelings of kinship with "ancient Chinamen":

Who left me a few words,  
Usually a pointless joke or a silly question  
A line of poetry drunkenly scrawled on the margin of a quick  
splashed picture. . . (2-5)

Here Whalen suggests the irrepressible nature of such poets with their cheering as the world "whizzed by," going to "hell in a handbasket," eventually "conked out" among cherry blossoms and winejars. The carefree attitude of these poets is echoed in the poem's free-verse form, the casualness of its off-rhyme, and its colloquial tone. With the poem's last line, "Happy to have saved us all," Whalen suggests a double meaning. Either poets as priests or bodhisattvas wrote poetry to express and transmit their Buddhist understanding or lay Buddhists wrote life-enhancing poetry for readers. The line implies that poets, themselves, can save people, although its playful tone suggests that readers should not take this easy platitude too seriously.

#### POETRY AS PRACTICE

"Sourdough Mountain Lookout" is a poem that more directly associates Whalen with Zen for his 1950 audience through its publication in

the *Chicago Review* Zen issue and its Buddhist references. Whalen incorporates Zen philosophy and Buddhist scriptures in the poem as a way to understand relations between the speaker's inner and outer worlds, especially the way in which all entities interpenetrate in a world paradoxically both full and empty, expressed as one past-present-future-memory-moment. The poem presents a fire lookout's experiences on Sourdough Mountain, similar to Whalen's own experience during the summers of 1953–1955 in Washington's Mt. Baker National Forest. It begins as the speaker (understood as a kind of Buddhist hermit poet) climbs up the mountain and describes his mountaintop world in company of bear, mice, flies, mountains, and stars. What to one contemporary critic was the speaker's passivity, from a Buddhist point of view could be considered mental action: observation of surroundings juxtaposed with the speaker's memories, including voices from the past and quotes from books the speaker is reading.<sup>14</sup>

Toward the end of the poem, the speaker's reflections become more focused on Buddhist tenets, as he quotes the Buddha and compares the encircling mountains to the circle of beads of a Buddhist rosary, in the empty center, the meditator. Attention then shifts to the next morning and a description of a souvenir rock of granite and crystal brought back from a walk:

A shift from opacity to brilliance  
(The Zenbos say, 'Lightning-flash & flint-spark') (158–159).

This phrase, familiar to Zen practitioners, suggests the experience of enlightenment.<sup>15</sup> The image's power is to suggest the sudden change in quality of life from unenlightened to enlightened, although physically the practitioner (like the rock) is the same. The speaker then presents another shift or turning point in the next stanza's statement of both the essential fullness and emptiness of the world:

What we see of the world is the mind's  
Invention and the mind  
Though stained by it, becoming  
Rivers, sun, mule-dung, flies—  
Can shift instantly (161–165).

These shifts are followed by a five-line refrain, which both expresses the speaker's situation in American slang and is Whalen's translation of the concluding mantram of the Prajnaparamita Sutra, one of the most important scriptures of the Zen tradition, providing in concise form the teaching of form in relation to emptiness:

Gone  
 Gone  
 REALLY gone  
 Into the cool  
 O MAMA! (167–171)<sup>16</sup>

The view from the lookout is full of objects, thoughts, and memories, but from the point of view of the sutra and Zen, all are equally empty or “gone.” However, even without the Buddhist association, these five lines could logically refer to departure from the lookout at the end of summer. The colloquialism, *gone*, is slang for “the most, the farthest out . . . ‘out of this world.’”<sup>17</sup> For Whalen, slang with its spontaneity and immediacy is adequate or even better to express this Buddhist realization. Going out of one’s mind and losing normal consciousness is equivalent to the sutra’s meaning.

However, a more evolved understanding of emptiness for D.T. Suzuki includes seeing things as they are.<sup>18</sup> Whalen includes this understanding, too, as the speaker closes the lookout:

Thick ice on the shutters  
 Coyote almost whistling on a nearby ridge  
 The mountain is THERE (between two lakes) (150–152).

Here the capitalized adverb is a simple and matter-of-fact place marker. More importantly, through the variety of levels and kinds of language play here, Whalen also narrows the gap between spirituality and ordinary life, one of Zen’s goals.

Whalen’s rather enigmatic closing lines for the poem hint at a Zen paradox:

Like they say, ‘Four times up,  
 Three times down.’ I’m still on the mountain. (172–173)

The couplet could mean that though he’s coming down from the mountain, his mind will still be on the peak, informed by insights gained there or that he is always in a mountain state of mind. The couplet also acts as a kind of capping verse to the speaker’s experience on the mountain and his attempt to understand the relationship between inner and outer worlds and the seeming opposites of form and emptiness, the poem’s *kōan* problem.

These lines also demonstrate Whalen’s adaptation of haiku in his work, a poetic form associated with Zen. Although Whalen creates some short poems, which he titles haiku, more often he incorporates haiku-like stanzas into longer poems often as a way to conclude with some turn or double meaning as in “Sourdough Mountain Lookout.”<sup>19</sup> Haiku often contain

such turning points, especially between second and third lines. Whalen's use of haiku may owe much to the ideas of R.H. Blyth who relates haiku and the *Zenrinkushu*, the Zen anthology of capping verses. For Blyth, haiku can express temporary enlightenment as can *kōan* practice. D.T. Suzuki also connects Zen and haiku with the idea that haiku are expressions of "inner feeling absolutely devoid of the sense of ego," a similar kind of response to the world required in solving a *kōan*.<sup>20</sup>

However, the *kōan* would prove more compelling for Whalen at this time. Other poems of this period have even stronger allusions to *kōan* practice in the way Whalen organizes them around *kōan*-like questions of perception and identity, the poem, itself, becoming a way Whalen, and by extension his readers, work out specific problems of life through art. "Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz. Mumonkan xxix," of 1958, demonstrates this method, its title referring to the 29th *kōan* of the *Mumonkan* or *Gateless Gate*, one of the most important *kōan* collections in Zen literature.<sup>21</sup> The poem juxtaposes the speaker's musings and memories in a free associative manner with phrases from the *kōan* printed in capital letters to contrast with the rest of the poem's lowercase type, further sectioning and differentiating between points of view with thick, black lines for a jazzy effect. In this *kōan* two monks argue about a flag moving in the wind. One claims that it is the flag moving, the other that it is the wind. The Sixth patriarch, Hui-neng, passing by, overhears the argument and comments that it is mind not wind or flag that moves; the *kōan* thereby demonstrates the relation of mind and phenomena.

Whalen begins his poem with an insomniac speaker, a cat, and a little ditty about a love named Kitty, followed by allusion to prayer-flags near Nanga Parbat, a mountain in the Himalayas. These flags bring to mind the wind moving and the 29th *kōan*, which the speaker may have been contemplating. Next the speaker recalls a driver hypnotized by windshield wipers (representing the flag moving). The speaker's free association in the poem also enacts mind's movement (Hui-Neng's response) concluding with a couplet which also acts as a capping verse:

& now I'm in my bed alone  
Wide awake as any stone (20–21)

The singsong rhythm here belies a serious tone, while simultaneously conveying the paradoxical aspect characteristic of *kōans*. The fact that the speaker is as wide awake as a stone is from the Western view irrational because stones are not sentient. However, from the Zen point of view, stones are equally part of the interpenetrating lifeworld. Considered as a capping phrase, this couplet is also spontaneous and grounded

in the moment enough to qualify as the speaker's own response to the 29th *kōan*.

Original face is perhaps the most important *kōan* for Whalen in regard to the questions of perception and consciousness he posits in his early poetry, necessitating a search for the real as opposed to the illusory in regard to the self or "I."<sup>22</sup>

The question of "what was your original face, before you were conceived," is asked directly in "I Return to San Francisco," a poem in which the speaker returns to the city from his isolation in Oregon. Although these are questions any human being faced by an identity crisis might ask, they also relate to *kōan* practice. Indeed according to some commentaries on the *kōan*, such personal questions are legitimate ones on which to meditate.

The most structurally exciting of these identity poems is "Self-Portrait, from Another Direction," a poem about a somewhat ordinary day in the life of the poem's speaker. Here the search for original face leads to self-portraiture, perhaps a contradiction in terms for a poet with Buddhist aspirations because for Buddhists the ego or "I" is illusory. This interest may also demonstrate, however, Whalen's appropriation of Buddhist tenets without the backing of formal Buddhist practice at this time. The poem begins with the speaker in bed as he wakes up and simultaneously contemplates and remembers taking a trip downtown. Future and past meet in present. The body of the poem not only describes these trips, but shows how easily the mind can travel with or without the body. In the poem's dynamic movement from inside to outside, mind to world, and room to town, the poet seeks to re-create the dynamics of interpenetrating space and time.

The poem ends with the speaker contemplating his face in the mirror (a self-portrait), which provides closure by returning the reader to the poem's beginning: "Into the mirror (NOW showing many men) all of them 'I.'" This circularity also illustrates the Buddhist concept of *pratitya-samutpada* or "conditioned arising," which explains how individual beings are caught in karmic cycles of existence. It is visualized as a chain of twelve links, beginning with ignorance, leading through desire and death with subsequent rebirth to a new round unless enlightenment takes place and the chain is broken. The poem in following the speaker's thought process, emphasized by line breaks and indentations, is also similar to the way a Buddhist practitioner watches his or her thoughts go by without attachment in meditation, recalling Whalen's statement of poetics. From this perspective, the poem may be read as a kind of Buddhist meditation on the way thought becomes present on the page.

In regard to this poem, Snyder comments in a 1960 letter to Whalen that he found it to be an "excellent rephrasing of the Lankavatara [Sutra]

(with Kegon undertones, especially the end).” The comment on Kegon “undertones” may relate to this Mahayana Buddhist school’s interest in the constitution and perception of reality, demonstrated by its privileging of the Avatamsaka Sutra that teaches the “mutually unobstructed interpenetration” of all things and “that buddha, mind, and all sentient beings and things are one and the same.”<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the speaker’s aim is to truly record the minute particulars of his days, “NOW,” as he phrases it in the poem’s last line. Such effort is similar to the poet’s difficulty in writing such a realistic poem and of literally enacting in words the “mutually unobstructed interpenetration” of all aspects of the speaker’s reality as separate, yet simultaneous with mind. This difficulty with writing and the physical toll it takes may relate not only to writer’s block or issues of originality, but to the ideas of the Lankavatara Sutra that words are not or can never be the truth. They can only point to it like a finger pointing toward the moon. The dilemma is that the translation of experience into words removes the poet-practitioner from the present moment in which he or she (as “Real self”) is ideally to live if truly enlightened.

#### KYOTO INTERLUDE

The shift in Whalen’s work to poems truly grounded in Zen practice may be demonstrated in later poetry, especially as he began to spend more time as Zen practitioner than as poet. An interim period for this is Whalen’s stay in Japan in the late 1960s where, as he states in a 1999 interview with David Meltzer, he began to sit “seriously.”<sup>24</sup> Some poems from his Kyoto days seem written from the perspective of a sightseer or an outsider looking in at a fascinating spiritual and aesthetically pleasing culture. Often the speaker of such poems walks and observes ceremonies and the beauty of Buddhist temples or sits and observes himself and others in the coffeehouse milieu. Other poems address Buddhist concerns more directly.

One of Whalen’s most important poems from this period and one that seems at first glance to be primarily political, is “The War Poem for Diane di Prima,” written as a protest of the Vietnam War, which was going on while Whalen was living in Japan. Much of this poem condemns the war and the United States government for sending young men to die in Vietnam for money and power, emphasized in the poem’s last lines:

Nobody wants the war only the money  
fights on, alone. (168–169)

The poem’s second section, however, titled, “The Real War,” describes a war fought at all times by all humans. The section begins as the speaker

watches water dropping down a rain-chain, which he free-associates with the twelve links in the Buddhist chain of causation. These stages are capitalized in the poem for emphasis and presented in list form moving from ignorance through desire to old age and death. The speaker privileges revolution over war, calling for a change in consciousness (recalling Whalen's interest in poetry as a valid and important way to make that change).

Other shorter poems provide more direct meditations on the nature of reality, while also bringing the speaker of the poem to new levels of awareness, an example being, "Walking beside the Kamogawa, Remembering Nansen and Fudo and Gary's Poem." The sight of stray cats along the river brings to the speaker's mind Gary Snyder's dying cat and the meaning of life and death, as well as the words of the Soto Zen teacher of San Francisco Zen Center:

Suzuki Roshi said, 'If I die, it's all right. If I should  
live, it's all right. Sun-face Buddha, Moon-face Buddha.' (15-16)

Here, Suzuki Roshi alludes to the 3rd *kōan* from the *Hekigan roku*, another famous Zen *kōan* collection.<sup>25</sup> This *kōan* forces the student to confront duality and to question the making of dualistic distinctions. The poem ends with a two-line capping phrase:

We don't treat each other any better. When will I  
Stop writing it down. (18-19)

This last line break foregrounds the speaker's query become admonishment ("stop writing it down"), implying that practice is more important than writing. The speaker's response also involves the realization that acceptance of the nonduality of life and death is not something that can be understood intellectually or even expressed in words. The poem ends with a postscript and the word, *hojo*, the Japanese term for a monk's cell, suggestive of Whalen's future path.

In this regard, Whalen's failure to begin formal practice during his stay in Japan is hinted at in several poems from this period. For example, "The Dharma Youth League" equates the failure of "several thousand gold buddhas" to do no more than sit during World War II with that of the Buddha's and Whalen's own, ending,

Does Buddha fail. Do I.  
Some day I guess I'll never learn. (6-7)

Here, the way declarative statements also ask questions and the last line juxtaposes optimism with failure creates a paradoxical ending that calls the concept of failure, itself, into question.

## PRACTICE AS POETRY: THE 1970S AND BEYOND

In the 1970s, Whalen formally became a Zen practitioner at the San Francisco Zen Center, and his role began to shift from poet to priest. He was given dharma transmission by Richard Baker Roshi in 1987 and was invested as Abbot of Hartford Street Zen Center in 1991. One consequence of his increased commitment was a decrease in poetic output in the 1980s, due to concerns and obligations to spend more time in meditation and teaching. This is especially true in the 1990s when his deteriorating health and failing eyesight became additional hindrances to writing.<sup>26</sup> Thus some might consider Zen's influence on Whalen as poet to be a negative one, especially in regard to the long poem as a form that seems to drop from his practice. However, Whalen continued to write short poems, often of a commemorative and occasional nature, most notably poems of the late 1970s and 1980s collected in *Some of These Days*, 1999. In addition, he became involved in new poetic endeavors as one of the co-translators for Kazuaki Tanahashi's project to translate the teachings of Soto Zen master Dōgen.<sup>27</sup> Significantly, Whalen's shorter, tighter, yet expressive poetry might be considered more in keeping with Dōgen's work and that of the Zen and Japanese poetic traditions in general, bearing out the contention that from a Zen perspective less is more.

Although Whalen never actually claimed the role of Zen poet, as a Zen priest he did make several statements about how his poetry might be understood in relation to Zen teachings. In a 1991 interview after his investiture as abbot of Hartford Street Zen Center, Whalen was asked by Schelling he ever thought of his poems as "Dharma teachings." Whalen's response was "In a way, yeah . . . Maybe it's possible that somebody who is already practicing might get the point as it were. And other people who weren't practicing might say, 'What is this practice thing about, what is Zen about?'" ("PW:ZI" 231). Later in the interview Schelling asks whether Whalen's poetry comes out of contemplative states or whether they are in the tradition of sutra or *kōan* material, and Whalen responds that much of what he has written was because he "saw things or heard things immediately" or that "something caught my attention," to which Anne Waldman adds that attention, itself, can be considered a contemplative state ("PW:ZI" 232–233).

A number of poems that express such a state, heightened by meditation, come from Whalen's Tassajara period collected in *Enough Said*.<sup>28</sup> For example, "Back to Normalcy" begins as the speaker's ear "stretches out across limitless space and time" (1) to hear even a fly walking while his eye catches the cat's eye. The rest of the poem is made up of ambient sounds

and sights: wind chimes, generator noise, snatches of conversation, and sunshine. The poem ends with an observation reminiscent of the way earlier poems close with a capping phrase while the rhythm of the lines adds emphasis and echoes meaning:

Brown dumb leaves fall on bright ferns  
New and thick since the fire (13–14)

The suggestion here is that everyday life equates with normalcy experienced as process and change; eventually the ferns will grow back after the fire, the fire in question being the great fire at Tassajara of 1977. The poet presents this flow and interpenetration of life on various levels (plant, animal, and human), all interacting in the poem through the speaker's consciousness. However, the fact that the poem's title is in quotations, a scrap of conversation overheard by Whalen, perhaps, draws attention to and questions accustomed language use. Is there a state of normalcy, or is each moment unique? This is another way of questioning dualistic thinking with the understanding that life is neither and both simultaneously.

Another poem from this period, "What's New?" also builds on the speaker's observations moving from outer to inner worlds, as he notes his reactions to happenings of daily life. Again the juxtaposition of objects, sensations, memories, and associations demonstrate and follow the mind in movement, part of the way Whalen's poetry can model a Buddhist perspective for both practitioners and nonpractitioners. The poem begins as a kimono falls from a hanger seen by the speaker not as a cause for anger, but as visual excitement: "Falling timelessly (if I say so) to the closet floor" (8). A few weeks later a similar experience when rug buckles and table falls causes an opposite reaction of chaos and the speaker's impulse to "(furious) grab, rush" (11). This is followed by another shift:

Fill in the blanks later, unexpected brilliant excursions  
And back again to the central trunk or channel, (15–16).

Here, Whalen refers to the practice of meditation in which wandering attention and thoughts are brought back to the center attached to stable spinal column or "central trunk." The poem ends with more mind excursions, as the falling kimono recalls waterfalls, first that of a PG & E station in San Francisco and then the waterfall that Buddhist monk, Morito Shonin, sat under in penance to Myo'o Fudo after killing his love. This anecdote may also relate to the Tassajara fire because Fudo is the god associated with fire.

Later poems of the 1980s, however, become even more spare and seemingly matter of fact, yet layered with meaning. For example, the 1986 poem, "On the Way to the Zendo," describes Whalen's life in New Mexico

at Cerro Gordo Temple and South Ridge Zendo where he followed Richard Baker Roshi in 1984.<sup>29</sup> This short poem of five lines has a haiku-like form juxtaposing the speaker's outer and inner worlds. It begins with physical sensations of the outside world, wind blowing leaves and ducks quacking, and then moves inward in its concluding lines:

SOME VERSIONS OF THE PASTORAL whistle in one ear,  
out the other.

Christopher Robin, Pooh and Piglet

Stomping through the Hundred Acre Wood. (4–7)

The capitalized phrase may refer to *Some Versions of Pastoral*, a literary study by William Empson about the pastoral, a genre that treats of an idyllic rustic life where city folk write poems as country folk, a possible reference to the speaker's situation.<sup>30</sup> The inclusion of *THE* in the capitalized phrase also allows for more general associations, the whistling of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*, for example. However, the speaker may have intentionally misquoted Empson's title with an implicit dismissal of too academic a treatment of a state better expressed by the humorous and charming image of the speaker "stomping" through the wood along with Milne's characters, Christopher Robin, Pooh, and Piglet. Thus a seemingly straightforward poem about a walk to the Zendo demonstrates not only the complexity of everyday life as outer and inner worlds meet in the poet-practitioner, but also suggests a critique.

#### CONCLUSION: BACK TO BEGINNINGS AND COMMON THREADS

This brief survey suggests that Whalen's body of work and poetics can be understood as continuously evolving over time in relation to his evolving Buddhist consciousness. Even his 1959 statement of poetics (that "poetry is a picture or graph of a mind moving") becomes modified in later years. In a statement from 1987 entitled, "About Writing and Meditation," he differentiates between his two habits of meditation and writing: "In my experience these two habits are at once mutually destructive and yet similar in kind."<sup>31</sup> In other words, poetry does not get written during meditation practice, but from a state of mind which develops from meditation. The practice of awareness is also one that does not make distinctions. In Zen terms this might be considered big mind.<sup>32</sup>

In early poems it seems to be writing, not necessarily Buddhist practice that can change consciousness and access the "Real self." This may also be because Whalen lacks formal Zen training in the 1950s and 1960s, when

most of his understanding of Zen comes either from books or from other practitioners. His commitment is more to the Beat avant-garde impulse to change American culture, evidenced partly by his intent to use a different language with which to write poetry, one inflected with Zen Buddhist terminology along with other levels and layers of discourse such as slang.

Eventually, as Whalen became a practitioner under the tutelage of Richard Baker Roshi and the Zen poet-priest on whom he had perhaps modeled himself from the 1950s, the focus of his later poems shifts to an emphasis on practice having the power to change the self and others with poetry understood more in Buddhist terms of skillful means. In “About Writing and Meditation,” Whalen suggests a way that poetry and Zen connect: “Maybe that’s where the poetry comes into all this, that it has to be an articulation of my practice and an encouragement to you to enter into Buddhist practice” (“AWM” 329).

Thus the purpose behind Whalen’s use of Zen changes as does the emphasis on Zen in his poetry. There are fewer direct allusions to Zen tenets, sutras, or practices and more attention to how phenomena of ordinary life and mind interpenetrate. Burton Watson, a scholar of Chinese and Japanese poetry, characterizes Zen poetry in a way that expresses the essence of Whalen’s poetry project: “Zen poetry usually eschews specifically religious or philosophical terminology in favor of everyday language, seeking to express insight in terms of the imagery and verse forms current in the secular culture of the period.”<sup>33</sup>

This shift is especially true in regard to how Whalen references *kōans* in poems. Whalen comments on the *kōan* and poetry in an oblique way in his 1991 interview with Schelling and Waldman when the question arises of how meditation practice informs poetry. Whalen admits that although poems or “certain phrases” don’t come to him in sitting meditation, “*kōan* practice is an activity where you do repeat, where you do come back always to a certain phrase,” hinting that he might include such phrases in poems (“PW:ZI” 233). However, at this point in the interview Whalen abruptly changes the subject, calling Schelling and Waldman’s questions about poetry’s relation to meditation or *kōan* practice bogus. In keeping with this attitude, although allusions to *kōans* continue to thread their way through later poems, they are presented more subtly. “UPON THE POET’S PHOTOGRAPH,” for example, the second section in “Epigrams and Imitations” of 1981, recalls the earlier concern with original face:

This printed face doesn’t see  
A curious looking in;  
Big map of nothing. (5–7)

The first two lines of this haiku present the meeting of two faces with the turn of the third line and the idea that both image and onlooker are “nothing.”<sup>34</sup> These three short lines more effectively question identity than Whalen’s rhetorical questions of the 1950s.

This brief overview of Whalen’s poetry has shown that despite shifts in his poetry from early to late, his basic concerns remain constant over time. These can be understood as an interest in using Buddhist, especially Zen, philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics, as the basis for his poetics and his poems and a way to access the “Real self.” One such interest is his exploration of the relation between what is inside the poet-speaker’s mind and what is going on in the outside world. From this interface, the poem grows. The poem is this interface. There is no distinction between the two. Whalen addresses this issue explicitly in an interview with Leslie Scalapino as he discusses how he puts his poems together, stating of “inside” and “outside” that “it has some connection also with the way Buddhist psychology looks at things; how you eventually find out the outside is really inside . . . You can’t say there’s something out there. It’s all inside.”<sup>35</sup> Thus, Whalen’s references to Zen Buddhist tenets and practice in his poetry, first as poet, then as poet-priest, is a constant throughout his writing career, and one when used as a lens to look at his body of work, brings it all, momentarily, into focus, a finger pointing at the moon.

#### NOTES

1. Allen Ginsberg, “The Six Gallery Reading,” in *Deliberate Prose*, 240. Ginsberg’s statement about this event, which brought East Coast Beats together with West Coast Renaissance poets was originally made in 1957 and titled, “The Literary Revolution in America.”

2. Definitions of Buddhist terms are from Ingrid Fischer-Schreiber, Franz-Karl Ehrhard, and Michael S. Diener, *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, trans. Michael H. Kohn (Boston: Shambhala, 1991).

3. Unless otherwise stated, the early poetry of Whalen from the 1950s and 1960s is quoted from *On Bear’s Head* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, World, Inc. and Coyote, 1969). Later poetry from the 1970s through the 1990s is quoted from *Canoeing Up Cabarga Creek* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1996). Hereafter these books will be cited in the text respectively as *OBH* and *CUCC*. *Sentient beings* is a Buddhist term. Whalen’s Greek term recalls Pound’s “New Paideuma,” described in *Culture*. Borrowing the term from Frobenius, Pound uses it to refer to “New Learning” or “whatever men of my generation can offer our successors as means to the new comprehension” (58). A letter from Whalen to Snyder of June 10, 1957, complains of the way “kritics” have misrepresented the Beat Generation and states that “the trouble is none of us has published anything like a manifesto.” He concludes

that whatever any of the group may write within the year “could present Slices of the New Paideuma,” implying that this poem could be such a manifesto.

4. This letter is from the Ginsberg Papers, Courtesy of Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Stanford University Libraries. Note that all of Whalen’s letters are quoted by permission of the Estate of Philip Whalen.

5. I am indebted to Gary Snyder for this characterization used in a letter to Whalen of January 13, 1960, to describe Whalen’s concerns in “Self-Portrait from Another Direction.” This letter is from Whalen’s archive at Reed College.

6. Philip Whalen, “Interview with Lee Bartlett,” in *Off the Wall*, 71.

7. In her study of the *kōan* with Miura Isshu, Ruth Fuller Sasaki explains that the Japanese student must find the appropriate “capping phrase” for the *kōan* assigned; then he presents “it to his teacher as the final step in his study of the *kōan*” (*Zen Kōan* 80). These phrases are usually drawn from the Zen anthology, *Zenrinkushu*.

8. Philip Whalen, “Statement of Poetics,” *New American Poetry Anthology*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1960): 420. Note that this statement first appears titled, “Since You Ask Me,” as the conclusion to *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age* and was created as a press release for a reading tour Whalen and Michael McClure went on in 1959.

9. Heinrich Dumoulin explains this image as a net of pearls hanging over Indra’s palace, whereby “each reflects the others . . . in looking at one pearl one sees them all” (47).

10. Both Blyth and Suzuki make connections between Zen and poetry, Blyth especially connecting Zen and haiku. In Suzuki’s series of essays on Zen Buddhism, he not only alludes to haiku, but frequently quotes the verses of Zen figures and Chinese and Japanese poets, their poems demonstrating enlightenment experiences and moments of awareness. Suzuki also discusses Zen’s claims regarding the limitations of more discursive and rational language. Whalen would also have been familiar with Snyder’s translations of the poems of Ch’an hermit poet, Han Shan.

11. Albert Saijo had studied Zen with Nyogen Senzaki in Los Angeles. For more on this period see interviews with Whalen collected in *Off the Wall*. For more on Snyder’s introduction to Zen see Suiter’s *Poets on the Peaks*. The Marin County zendo was organized by Gary Snyder.

12. Philip Whalen, “Philip Whalen: Zen Interview,” in *Disembodied Poetics*, 225. Hereafter quotes from this interview will be cited in the text with the abbreviation, “PW:ZI.”

13. Note that all letters from Whalen to Snyder are quoted permission of Snyder’s archive at the University of California, Davis, Davis, California and by permission of the estate of Philip Whalen.

14. See Thurley for Buddhism as passive; see Davidson for a more positive presentation of Buddhism and Whalen’s work.

15. D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 3rd series glosses this: “The idea is to show immediateness of action, an uninterrupted movement of life-energy” (363).

16. D.T. Suzuki, *Manual of Zen Buddhism* provides the Sanskrit and its translation: “*Gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha*,” or in English: “O Bodhi, gone gone gone to the other shore, landed at the other shore, Svaha!” (27).

17. Lawrence Lipton, 316.

18. D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 3rd series, 238.

19. Philip Whalen interview with the author, San Francisco, California, July 2000. On his use of haiku, Whalen noted the difficulty of writing haiku in English, stating that the Japanese language was needed for true haiku. “The Slop Barrel” also ends with a haiku-like stanza as do other poems from this period.

20. R.H. Blyth, *Haiku*, Vol 1, 24 and D.T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* 225. At times Whalen uses a series of shorter haiku-like stanzas to make longer poems, “Opening the Mountain, Tamalpais: 22:x:65,” 1965, being an example. This poem, a record of the circumambulation of Mt. Tam by Whalen, Snyder, and Ginsberg, is made up of short sections in which natural images are juxtaposed with moments of realization, memories, or quotes from the day usually with a turn before the last line in haiku-like fashion.

21. According to the interview with the author in summer, 2000, Whalen was familiar with the collection of *kōan* compiled by Paul Reys and Nyogen Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*; this *kōan* appears on pages 143–144 of this volume. The title of this poem as it originally appeared in *Memoirs of an Interglacial Age* did not reference the 29th *kōan*, whereas the title thereafter does. Leaving out this information makes the poem more problematic, forcing readers to make the connection themselves. “All About Art and Life,” another poem of this period, asks *kōan*-like questions, too: “WHAT IS IT I’M SEEING?” and “WHO’S LOOKING?”

22. According to Alan Watts in *The Way of Zen*, the usual first *kōans* given to students are Hui-Neng’s “Original Face,” Chao-Chou’s “Wu,” or Hakuin’s “One Hand” (161).

23. Both sutras are important texts for Zen Buddhists. Whalen expresses his own understanding of the Lankavatara Sutra to Ginsberg in a letter of September 11, 1958, stating that this sutra “explains how the mind is constituted & how it manufactures illusion.” This sutra also addresses the problems with language familiar to practitioners of Zen, that words are not the truth but only able to point to it.

24. Philip Whalen, “Philip Whalen,” in *San Francisco Beat*, ed. David Meltzer, 329.

25. This is Basō’s *kōan*, “Sun-faced Buddhas, Moon-faced Buddhas.” Suzuki Roshi not only established San Francisco Zen Center, but also gave Whalen’s teacher, Richard Baker Roshi, dharma transmission.

26. Regarding his poetic output and its publication, *Enough Said*, 1980, was his last major original collection, aside from *Some of These Days*, 1999. The title of the

1980 volume may be Whalen's self-criticism on the writing of poetry from a Zen Perspective. Thanks to Michael Rothenberg for a discussion of this idea. Regarding Whalen as teacher, the didactic role has been a congenial one for him and part of his poetic agenda from the 1950s as evidenced in "Since You Ask Me," where he claims that he has inherited Dr. Johnson's title of teacher.

27. Whalen's translations appear in two out of three of the Dōgen volumes (*Moon in a Dewdrop* and *Enlightenment Unfolds*) while the third volume, *Beyond Thinking*, is dedicated to him. San Francisco Zen Center under the direction of Richard Baker Roshi was the original sponsor of Tanahasi's project beginning in 1977.

28. For more on this period, see the Preface to this volume.

29. Richard Baker Roshi resigned as head of San Francisco Zen Center in 1983 over a scandal that began with exposure of his sexual indiscretions and was later compounded by what some considered his authoritarian leadership style. Whalen, loyal to his teacher, followed Baker Roshi to the new Zen center he established in New Mexico, spending several years there. Whalen subsequently received dharma transmission from Baker Roshi. For more on this period see Downing's *Shoes Outside the Door*.

30. Thanks to Eric Birdsall for an enlightening discussion of William Empson and this poem.

31. Philip Whalen, "About Writing and Meditation," in *Beneath a Single Moon*, ed. Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich, 328. Hereafter quotes from this statement will be cited in the text using the abbreviation, "AWM." This statement was originally made at a conference entitled, "The Poetics of Emptiness," at Green Gulch Farm in April 1987 and was reprinted in *Beneath a Single Moon*.

32. "Big mind" is a term used by the Soto Zen teacher and founder of the San Francisco Zen Center Shunryu Suzuki in his talks collected in the volume, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Of big mind he states that it is "something to express, but it is not something to figure out. Big mind is something you have, not something to seek for" (92). In another lecture he explains that the essence of mind is "that everything is included within your mind" (35).

33. Burton Watson, "Zen Poetry," in *Zen: Tradition and Transition*, ed. Kenneth Kraft, 106.

34. In an unpublished typescript, "Notions About Teaching Classes Dealing With The Zen Lineage," in Whalen's archive at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, he comments that *kōans* and stories in *kōan* books had "one kind of meaning" before "intensive zazen" and "another meaning" after practicing at Zen Center. He concludes that book learning needs to be "measured against one's own experience and judgment" (7–8). This is quoted by permission of the Bancroft Library and the Estate of Philip Whalen.

35. Leslie Scalapino, "How Phenomena Appear to Unfold." This is a quote from an interview Leslie Scalapino had with Whalen in the 1980s included in a talk with this title given at Naropa in 1989.

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# 6

## Keeping Vision Alive

*The Buddhist Stillpoint in the Work of  
Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg*

ERIK MORTENSON

For Beat Generation writers the visionary state reveals the truth of the world—it is a peek behind the curtain of reality that provides an authentic glimpse of the universe. By eradicating mental structures and preconceptions, the vision provides an opportunity to see the past in a new light, thus creating potential for change. But the paradox of the transcendental is that the fullness associated with the visionary state is soon extinguished, as the seer returns to quotidian existence to make sense of their privileged experience. The question for the Beats, then, is how to carry insights gleaned from such ephemeral experience into the future. The revelations that the visionary moment generates must have a *use* if they are to avoid slipping back into obscurity once that moment recedes. Discussions of transcendental visionary experience in the work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg grapple with this difficulty, as both authors struggle to make sense of their visions. Ultimately, both turn to the Buddhist conception of a “stillpoint” lying beyond rigid ego consciousness for an answer. While not always successful, Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s deployment of the Buddhist stillpoint allows them to turn seemingly isolated visionary experience into a means of connecting past, present, and future into a meaningful whole.

The problem both writers face in their attempt to profit from the transcendental is that they make the visionary moment an end rather than a means. The allure of visions is that they seem to provide a final solution—a glance at true reality that appears to need no further elaboration. Visionary experience, however, is only the starting point for a wider wisdom that the vision makes possible. In his essay “Emerging from Nonidentity,” Michel Mohr explores the historical use of *kōans* in Buddhism to induce the transcendental moment of “satori.” He cautions that satori is not a “once-and-for-all goal to be reached in the future,” but involves “constantly going beyond first awareness of nonduality and aiming at integrating this insight into daily life until no trace of transient exalted states remain” (266). The vision inaugurates the beginnings of a “nonduality” that allows the seer to go beyond the arbitrary divisions created by consciousness. But the vision is a mere scaffolding, since these “transient exalted states” are not meant to leave “traces.” Visionary experience is best thought of as an opening that provides an opportunity to reconceive one’s relationship to the world.

In contrast to this notion of the ecstatic moment of vision is what I am terming the Buddhist “stillpoint.” Where vision is often configured as a movement outward that seeks to transcend the self in a search for otherworldly experience, the Buddhist stillpoint is inward-focused, a result of embodied meditation that seeks to locate the center within the subject. In *Encouraging Words: Zen Buddhist Teachings for Western Students*, Robert Aitken describes the ambiguous Sino-Japanese term “sesshin”: “In sesshin, you touch the mind—that is, you touch the place where there is no coming and going . . . This breath-moment does not come from anywhere and it has no tail of association” (10). Based on the body, this “breath moment” creates a type of pure present where the mind can be encountered without interference. Aitken argues for a naiveté in Buddhist practice, a sort of “always starting over.” Shunryu Suzuki, in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, reiterates this, claiming that “In Japan we have this phrase soshin, which means ‘beginner’s mind.’ The goal of practice is always to keep our beginner’s mind” (21). For the sake of simplicity, I am calling the type of attention that both Aitken and Suzuki describe a stillpoint, and I will return to this concept later. What is important here is that by placing the eruptive visionary state in tension with the Buddhist stillpoint, we are better able to understand the work of Kerouac and Ginsberg. These authors begin their careers through a reliance on visionary experience both as an inspiration for their writing as well as a lens to understand their place in the world. But as time unfolds, they evidence two opposite tendencies—Kerouac continually seeks new visions while Ginsberg repeatedly refers back to his original visionary experience. And while both writers discover Buddhism, their

development in this area follows separate paths as well. Kerouac typically employs Buddhism as a means of avoidance, while Ginsberg, through an increasing focus on his body, utilizes the Buddhist stillpoint to harness his visionary experience.

Unfortunately, scholarly works tend to accept the Beat visionary moment uncritically. Regina Weinreich, in *The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac* (1987), focuses on Kerouac's epiphanies as a site for his continual remaking of myth. Weinreich notes that "IT therefore represents some form of isolated and radiating pleasure as a feeling and end in itself, unallied to some purpose or spiritual accomplishment" (54). Weinreich remains vague when it comes to explaining "IT" itself. The words "some form" hint at this—Weinreich is unwilling to push her descriptions of Kerouac's vision further than his own descriptions. The tautological nature involved here is rampant in the critical literature. In *Kerouac, the Word and the Way* (2000), Ben Giamo quotes Kerouac's description of the alto man in *On The Road*, then is content to let the passage speak for itself, claiming: "The model seems clear enough: to know time is to escape its structure through improvisation, then the secret note hit and the moment enlivened . . . One only has to think of Coltrane's method and sound. There you have it, and—once you do—IT carries you away" (35). John Lardas's *The Bop Apocalypse* (2001) is also content to reduce the visionary moment to simple description based mainly on references from Beat writers themselves, although Lardas goes a small step further, collapsing epiphany into his Spenglerian framework.

An exception to this trend is Paul Maltby's *The Visionary Moment: A Postmodern Critique*. Maltby attacks Kerouac for positing an untenably metaphysical realm outside time that is supposed to contain truth. Utilizing his postmodern critique, Maltby wants to read Kerouac's visions as rhetorical devices designed to argue for the importance of the epiphanic moment over a temporality ruled by technology. Yet Maltby's insistence on rhetoric does not permit him to understand that Beat vision is not limited to the heightened moment itself, but draws on the past to create a new future. For the Beats, the visionary moment is not merely the end of time and self, but also a beginning—a chance to reconfigure subjectivity that has ramifications for the future. What all of these commentators have in common is a willingness to halt at the abyss of the visionary moment, rather than plunging in and risking a more thorough investigation. Beat scholarship must stop relying on the Beats themselves, and instead seek a fuller appreciation of the visionary moment and its ramifications.

Let's start by examining a successful Beat vision. According to Ann Charters, prompted by Ginsberg's descriptions of D.T. Suzuki's essays

and his friend Neal Cassady's enthusiasm for the spiritualist Edgar Cayce, Kerouac began his Buddhist studies in January 1954 (*Kerouac* 191). This "healing" vision was the result of a series of Buddhist meditations that are best described in *The Dharma Bums*, a novel that many credit as launching a postwar Buddhist revival.<sup>1</sup> Kerouac writes, "I began to experience what is called 'Samapatti,' which in Sanskrit means Transcendental Visits . . . . It, the vision, was devoid of any sensation of I being myself, it was pure egolessness, just simply wild ethereal activities devoid of any wrong predicates" (147). The loss of self is a hallmark of the visionary state—destruction of the ego is required for transcendental experience to be achieved. In a 1956 letter to his friend's wife Carolyn Cassady, Kerouac describes this feeling of "Samapatti":

On March 12 my birthday my mother had a bad insistent sneeze-cough that finally got her throat all sore . . . I resolved to sit up in my bed . . . and hypnotize myself to find out what was wrong. Immediately there came a vision of a 'Heet' rub bottle, and of a brandy bottle, and finally of round white flowers. I went to the parlor . . . and told her to put Heet on her throat to ease and circulate on the outside and 'tomorrow we'll get brandy for the inside' and I looked and there was a bowl of round white flowers on the table and I (without saying anything) took them out and left them on my porch, and the next day her cough subsided, stopped altogether when she drank the brandy I ordered. (*Selected* 572)

Kerouac's achievement of egolessness allows for a reconfiguration of the past placement of objects in the room and the causal connections generally established between them. The vision does not create anything new. Rather, it provides Kerouac with a new means of understanding the old. Everyday objects like a rub bottle and round white flowers gain a new significance as they are dislodged from ordinary thought patterns, and potentialities like the purchasing of brandy are called into being. Time and space get reshuffled—the flowers are moved from the table to the porch, the Heet bottle is brought to the parlor and utilized, and a new future (tomorrow we'll get brandy for the inside) is mapped. Admittedly, Kerouac's vision is a bit mundane. But what it does demonstrate is that through a Buddhist meditative practice he is able to leave the self and discover a visionary moment that breaks down the boundaries between past, present, and future that ordinary consciousness establishes in order to alter his life in a meaningful way.

Kerouac and Ginsberg were not the only people to discover Zen Buddhism during the postwar period. As Richard Hughes Seager notes in his *Buddhism in America*, "D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts interpreted Zen for a

broad American audience at mid-century” (91). But why Zen Buddhism, and why then? While the introduction of Buddhism to America is usually traced to the “World Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893” (Prebish 5), it did not gain widespread appeal until after the World War II. The reason for a broader public interest in the postwar period can be found in the fact that Zen in America resisted institutionalization, and thus appealed to the anti-conformism of the time. As Seager notes, “The shared interest of these Japanese teachers and their American students in experiential religion unconstrained by institutions was, in many respects, a perfect fit” (91). Distrust in institutions went hand-in-hand with a Zen practice, which encouraged each individual student to find his or her own conception of self. Daniel Belgrad thus draws a connection between Zen Buddhism and the interest in spontaneity during the period: “Of all the philosophical and theoretical schools influencing the postwar avant-garde, Zen Buddhism was the least subject-centered” (167). Only through a lack of subjectivity could spontaneity be produced and authenticity achieved. But perhaps Hettie Jones explains it best in a 1996 roundtable “Women Writers of the Beat Generation,” moderated by Ann Charters. In response to a question about the role of Buddhism in their lives, Jones responds, “I think in a general way the whole Beat idea and its relationship to Buddhism and its whole place in American society at that time was really an antimaterialist point of view. Buddhism was very attractive to those of us who were disaffected with the organized religion we were brought up with” (*Beat Down* 631). Anticonformist, antimaterialist, antiinstitution—Zen Buddhism offered a personalized response to the constraints of postwar culture that found appeal among the Beats.

Kerouac and Ginsberg were at the vanguard of a Beat movement that sought to replace a rigid and materialistic postwar America with a spontaneous, Beat lifestyle. Doubtless, then, that Zen appealed to them as a breath of fresh air in a stultifying 1950s society. But Buddhism offered Kerouac and Ginsberg something more—a completely new relationship to their own selves. What exactly is the Buddhist stillpoint? A more detailed explanation of this true self lying beyond an ossified ego can be found in the work of Shunryu Suzuki. In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* Suzuki writes, “When you dip your brush into the ink you already know the result of your drawing, or else you cannot paint. So before you do something, ‘being’ is there, the result is there. Even though you look as if you were sitting quietly, all your activity, past and present, is included” (106). According to Suzuki, to separate past and future through the wedge of the present is a mistake. The present already includes these two temporalities, and thus to fret about how to remember the gains made from an old moment of vision

or to worry about how to propel gains forward is irrelevant—when the next moment comes it will already encompass these insights. As Alan Watts, in his work *Zen and the Beat Way*, explains: “We live in a sort of hourglass with a big bulb at one end (the past) and a big bulb at the other end (the future); we are the neck in between, and we have no time. . . . The truth of the matter is that we have, in fact, an enormous present in which we live and the purely abstract borders of this present are the past and the future” (12). We impose “purely abstract borders” on the present, but we are actually only limiting ourselves. If we can discover this stillpoint beyond the ego, then the present expands to include a past and future that we normally consider beyond our grasp.

The Buddhist stillpoint, by opening up the moment to include past and future, creates a closer connection between the self and the world. In *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen*, Watts remarks that “the ego finds that its own center and nature is beyond itself. . . . Here I find my own inner workings functioning of themselves, spontaneously . . . I find that I cannot help doing and experiencing, quite freely, what is always ‘right’” (6). The “self beyond self” does not need to think its actions, it simply does. The ego is an impediment—we falsely believe that we need to think through matters on a conscious level when actually our mind already knows the appropriate course of action. Kerouac receives his healing vision not from some mystical other world, but from within his very self. Kerouac’s relationship to his surroundings is altered in such a way that subject and object break down to reveal the hidden connections between them. Such a revelation seems extraordinary only because what Suzuki terms the small mind so often overshadows the big mind that exceeds it. As Kerouac explains in his Buddhist sutra *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, “Did I create that sky? Yes, for, if it was anything other than a conception in my mind I wouldn’t have said ‘Sky’—This is why I am the golden eternity. There are not two of us here, reader and writer, but one, one golden eternity, One-Which-It-Is, That-Which-Everything-Is” (23).

Kerouac’s golden eternity is the state beyond mind where everything becomes One, where there is no need to think in terms of carrying gains across from one moment to another since any one moment contains all moments, past and future. The Buddhist stillpoint thus offers Kerouac and Ginsberg a means of jettisoning their smaller, more ego-driven selves in exchange for a conception of self that expands their connection to the universe. Yet how is this stillpoint achieved? The road to “big mind” leads through the notion of emptiness, or what Buddhism terms “*sunyata*.” According to Aitken, all too often people mistake emptiness with negativity, and end up fearing what they should be embracing: “Why should you

want to cling to things of the past, the present, or the future? It is because there isn't anything else. Emptiness, the void, yawns beneath the structure, so it is natural that you should hold fast to the forms of the time" (16). Rather than clinging to time in the hopes of avoiding the void, Aitken counsels a letting go. The point here is to use *sunyata* to achieve a stillpoint within, rather than externalizing it as emptiness or void that threatens the self from without.

In terms of subjectivity, the goal becomes to bring this nothingness inward as a means of attaining the type of stillpoint that Buddhist thinkers like Aitken, Suzuki, and Watts describe. Buddhist *sunyata* is not conceived of as another realm standing outside subjectivity that confronts the self with an abyss. Rather, it is an innermost possibility that lies dormant within everyone, waiting for the self to seize it.

Most commentators see Kerouac's view of *sunyata* as a means of breaking down oppositions in a search for wholeness.<sup>2</sup> But despite occasional successes like his healing vision, Kerouac either flees this emptiness or embraces it too fully—he never abides it. Various commentators have noticed Kerouac's use of Buddhism as a mechanism of avoidance, rather than a means to self-disclosure. In Charters's roundtable, several commentators had a chance to voice their thoughts on Buddhism's role during the postwar period. Joyce Johnson, Kerouac's lover, explains that "my own feelings are that he sort of misused Buddhism as a way of rationalizing his deepest hang-ups rather than trying to overcome them" (*Beat Down* 631). Carolyn Cassady immediately agrees, stating that he liked it about Buddhism that "when he got into sticky situations you could say, 'Oh, it's all an illusion.' That's how he sort of resolved things" (631). Kerouac is using the notion of emptiness as a justification for his actions, rather than as a means to attain an experience of *sunyata*. This "nothing matters" attitude was likewise noted by Alan Watts, who called Kerouac to task in his work "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen": "when Kerouac gives his final philosophical statement, 'I don't know. I don't care. And it doesn't make any difference'—the cat is out of the bag, for there is a hostility in these words which clangs with self-defense" (Charters *Beat Reader* 612). According to Watts, Kerouac misses the point. Any need to justify is an indication that ego is still present, that the disciple has not truly found the stillpoint beyond conceptions of self. Instead of taking the notion of emptiness within himself, Kerouac uses it as a license to flee material affairs.

Kerouac's escapism is twofold. In contradistinction to this desire to use *sunyata* as an excuse for his actions is Kerouac's continual abandonment to the visionary moment of *satori*. Buddhism defines *satori* as a

flash-illumination that helps the disciple reach an enlightened state. But instead of using satori to achieve a stillpoint, Kerouac often figures it as transcendence outside the self. This tendency finds its most memorable expression in *On The Road*, where Kerouac relates that “for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach . . . myself hurrying to a plank where all the angels dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness” (173). Kerouac externalizes the notion of emptiness into a “holy void” where he can passively fall. The spatialization of nothingness that occurs here demonstrates the degree to which Kerouac has missed the concept of *sunyata*—rather than bringing this notion into oneself to create a stillpoint, Kerouac has instead created an external realm where the abyss is filled with action and flux. In a letter to Neal Cassady describing his fish-and-chips vision, Kerouac ends with the pronouncement “like shortwave radio, its all in the air and is still there for me to grasp another day, and I hope to, I want to, I know I will” (*Selected* 281). The benefits of the vision remain, but in an externalized form that exists outside Kerouac. Despite his desire to recoup this moment, Kerouac seems ambivalent as to whether he will ever re-attain this state. Here is the root of Kerouac’s problem—rather than seeking to absorb the vision as a fundamental fact of his life, he instead opts to recapture a visionary moment that, once gone, is always a step beyond him.

Ultimately, what Kerouac is after is the moment of transcendence itself, continually repeated. Take, for example, Kerouac’s later novel *Satori in Paris* (1966). In it, Kerouac explains, “Somewhere during my ten days in Paris (and Brittany) I received an illumination of some kind that seems to’ve changed me again, towards what I suppose’ll be my pattern for another seven years or more” (7). Note the hesitancy and doubt: at this late point in his life, Kerouac is finding visions everywhere—in a conversation with an art dealer, in a look from a priest, and in the taste of creamery butter. Where satori should be a means of grasping the possibilities for an authentic existence, here it is simply a desire for transcendence that must be continually repeated. The visionary moment of satori is impossible to recuperate for Kerouac, since it is not so much the insight gained that is desired as the blissful moment of transcendence. By continually looking for the visionary outside of self, Kerouac dooms himself to a continual groping after the transcendental experience for its own sake.

Ginsberg’s use of the visionary errs in the opposite direction. Like Kerouac, Ginsberg saw his visions as a central aspect of his life. In 1948, while living in a Harlem apartment building, Ginsberg had a life-altering vision of the English poet William Blake. In an interview with Paul Portuges, Ginsberg says of his Blake vision, “But I also said at the time, now that I have

seen this heaven on earth, I will never forget it, and I will never stop referring all things to it, I will never stop considering it the center of my human existence and the center of my life which is now changed" (*On the Poetry* 131). Ginsberg's Blake vision becomes the focal point for his existence and affirms his desire to be a poet. But while Kerouac fails by continually chasing after the next vision, Ginsberg's problem is that he staunchly refuses to leave the first. His vow to "never stop referring all things" to his Blake vision left Ginsberg locked into this single episode in his life. As he explains in *Allen Verbatim*, "I spent fifteen-twenty years trying to re-create the Blake experience in my head, and so wasted my time. . . . So I did finally conclude that the bum trip on acid as well as the bum trip on normal consciousness came from attempting to grasp, desiring a pre-conceived end" (18). Ginsberg's desire for a "pre-conceived end" is antithetical to the openness to the world that visionary experience demands. While Kerouac projects forward into a yet-to-be-conceived visionary space always on the horizon, Ginsberg repeatedly returns to a known past as a yardstick for measuring his present. Both are locked out of the immediate moment.

What separates Ginsberg from Kerouac is his willingness to shift attention toward the body. The repeated overlay of past conceptions onto present experience keeps Ginsberg from engaging the present with the complete openness and possibility that is necessary for the visionary state to be adequately deployed. In his *Paris Review* interview, Ginsberg explains that if he did not renounce his Blake vision, "I'd be hung up on a memory of an experience. Which is not the actual awareness of now, now. In order to get back to now, in order to get back to the total awareness of now and contact, sense perception contact with what was going on around me, or direct vision of the moment, now I'd have to give up this continual churning thought process of yearning back to a visionary state" (*Spontaneous Mind* 49). Ginsberg's recourse to his Blake vision stifles his ability to utilize the insights from that past moment and keeps him from experiencing new forms of transcendence. All that remains is the conscious memory of the vision, not the immediate impact that the vision created. The problem with both Kerouac's and Ginsberg's attempts to recoup the visionary moment is that the gains achieved through the transcendental state are always figured as lying elsewhere. It is only when Ginsberg begins to think about the body that he is able to achieve an oneness with the present which, paradoxically, includes the Blake vision that he is trying so desperately to regain.

By focusing on the body, Ginsberg is able to achieve a connection with the present that allows him access to his former visionary experience. Ginsberg had encountered Buddhism as early as the 1940s while a student of Raymond Weaver at Columbia University. But it was not until 1953, with

the discovery of D.T. Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, that his studies began in earnest (Schumacher 153). It would take a trip to India in 1962, however, before Ginsberg realized the role that the body plays in Buddhism. Ginsberg explains in an interview with Ekbert Faas that his poem "The Change" represents "a final abandonment of the pursuit of heaven . . . final abandonment of the attempt to reconstruct the Blake vision I once had, and live by that. Because, finally, the memory of the Blake vision left such a strong impression of universal consciousness that it didn't seem right to abandon it" ("Interview" 279).

The problem is not the vision itself, but Ginsberg's relationship to it. Formerly, he had read the vision as a glimpse of heaven, and thus tortured himself with trying to reconstruct this state. His dogged attempts only resulted in "monster vibrations," which he had interpreted as malicious, but were in reality simply the "opposite side of that, which was non-celestial and murderous" ("Interview" 274). The change Ginsberg details in his poem is the realization that his striving after the transcendental is unnecessary since it already resides within him. He writes:

Come, sweet lonely Spirit, back  
to your bodies, come great God  
back to your only image, come  
to your many eyes & breasts. (*Collected Poems* 328)

Through a return to the body, Ginsberg is able to achieve the Buddhist still-point that contains his earlier Blake vision. In his *Paris Review* interview, Ginsberg traces this illumination to his time spent in India, where various gurus advised, "Live in the body: this is the form that you're born for" (SM 48). On a train in Japan, Ginsberg has another epiphany, realizing that there is "nothing more to fulfill, except be willing to die when I am dying, whenever that be. And be willing to live as a human in this form now" (48). This insistence on the body places Ginsberg squarely back into the present moment that surrounds him. Instead of continually trying to recapture his transcendent Blake vision, he can now attain the sort of insight that the Blake vision provided him through a reengagement with his Buddhist "big mind." By returning to the body, the world opens up again, disclosing the sort of interconnectedness and wonder that characterized his earlier heightened moment. Once this is achieved, there is no need to fret about losing anything—every moment exists within every other, and Ginsberg's earlier Blake vision is again made available in such a way that it does not eclipse the possibilities of the present moment.

What makes the body valuable to Ginsberg is that a receptive bodily state is more readily attainable than an idiosyncratic moment of vision.

Take, for example, the meditative Zen Buddhist practice of “sitting zazen.” As Suzuki explains, “The most important point is to own your own physical body. If you slump, you will lose your self. Your mind will be wandering about somewhere else; you will not be in your body. This is not the way. We must exist right here, right now!” (27). Mind and body are inextricably linked—only by owning your body can your mind focus on the moment at hand. More importantly, the insights gained from such a return to the present are reproducible. Buddhism is a practice, a set of techniques that allows the disciple to make steady progress toward an authentic encounter with the every day. As Aitken comments, “You are always in a certain condition, sometimes healthy, sometimes toxic . . . You may be in a palace with tapestries and picture windows, or you may be in a prison. But even in a prison you can practice” (18). External conditions are “empty”—as long as there is a body, then Buddhist practice is possible.

It is this notion of a Buddhist practice that separates Kerouac’s stalled forays into the world of Buddhism from Ginsberg’s lifelong commitment to his spiritual development. Rick Fields, in *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, comments that the Buddhism during the postwar period “was mostly literary” (214). Lacking the physical component, many Beats were left with the purely mental aspect of Zen training. Another Zen adept, Philip Whalen, recalls that Kerouac “was incapable of sitting for more than a few minutes at a time . . . He never learned to sit in that proper sort of meditation position . . . Even had he been able to, his head wouldn’t have stopped long enough for him to endure it” (*Swans* 214). Ginsberg points to this omission as the fundamental cause of Kerouac’s inability to realize a true Buddhist practice. In “Negative Capability: Kerouac’s Buddhist Ethic,” Ginsberg writes, “Unfortunately, Kerouac had no teacher in the lineage of Zen or classical Buddhism. And so the one thing lacking was the tool . . . namely the sitting practice of meditation—actually to take in his body the notion of emptiness or examine it as a process of mind” (371). Ginsberg, by contrast, pays ever more attention to the role of the body as his work progresses. Themes such as the deterioration of the body, the poet’s eventual death, keeping a straight spine, and frank discussions of sex can be found throughout Ginsberg’s later works. Ginsberg’s Buddhist practice ensures that even supposedly negative bodily associations are recognized in an effort to remind himself that life is fleeting and thus should be enjoyed all the more because of this fact. Even up until the end, the present moment is where one’s attention should be put.

Even with a focus on the body, the Buddhist stillpoint is difficult to maintain. Nowhere is this more in evidence than in Ginsberg’s cryptic “Bad Poem.” This piece, included in his last collection of verse *Death and*

*Fame*, encapsulates the difficulties in adhering to a Buddhist insistence on the transitory present:

Being as Now has been re-invented  
 I have devised a new now  
 Entering the real Now  
 At last  
 Which is now. (53)

Here the trick is to make sense of the two versions of the present being offered—the capitalized “Now” versus the lower-case “now” with which it is compared. How is “Now” being “re-invented”? If this “Now” means the present conceived of as a “space” of time, then it is doomed to be remade every time it slips into the past. But why does this force Ginsberg to devise a new now, and one whose lower-case spelling signals a shift from the previous “Now”? Perhaps because this is the subject’s entry into time, placing a meaning on the undifferentiated wholeness of the abstract “Now.” This idea holds some merit, since in the very next line this little “now” is going to enter the “real” (and why “real”?) “Now” and become redefined again. But the end of the poem confounds such a meaning, since it is as if the real Now somehow becomes the little now that the poet has devised. If we then loop up to the beginning of the poem, we can start anew—“Now” has been “re-invented” by the little “now”(s) that continually seek to replace it. But why is this poem deemed “Bad”? Because it poorly expresses Ginsberg’s sentiment, or that it fails to follow the line of thought that Buddhism demands? Maybe both—in its inability to fully disclose meaning it serves as a *kōan*. Rather than searching for a meaning to a seemingly nonsensical paradox, the reader is expected to meditate on the difficulties of producing any coherent representation of something so fleeting as a “now.” The poem can also be thought of as Bad in a Buddhist sense. The disciple should not be replacing the Now with a now, but should instead learn to appreciatively abide the real Now moment. Both literally and metaphorically, “Bad Poem” demonstrates the difficulties inherent in grasping the fleeting moment of now in any straightforward manner.

Despite the difficulties inherent in grounding existence on something so ephemeral as transcendental experience, the Beats view the visionary moment as the key to understanding the future. In a letter to Neal Cassady, Kerouac goes as far as to claim, “If I were ready for that vision, as I was not then, I think I would be able to understand everything and never forget it” (*Selected* 278). For the Beats, the vision reveals the truth of the world, and it becomes the seer’s job to prepare for, experience, and interpret this event. The heightened moment is what provides the possibility

for a new trajectory into the void, a chance to change the direction of one's life. Visions do not create entirely novel possibilities. Rather, they reconfigure the visionary's understanding of the world. Consider Ginsberg's pronouncement regarding the predictatory powers of the visionary moment in *Allen Verbatim*: "I think the experiences made sense by hindsight and have come true since. In a sense they were glimpses of what I feel now, all the time . . . In other words I was imagining my own potential awareness from a limited virginal shy tender blossom of feeling" (21–22). The vision does not fate one to a particular future, nor does it produce a pathway that was never there before. It allows the visionary to seize opportunities that were always there but never consciously realized. Such an understanding remains dormant, always available to those who allow themselves to find it. The Buddhist stillpoint beyond the self has already "predicted" the past and will always already make use of the future. The visionary's job is to reach that stillpoint in the present which, once attained, dissolves the self into a "momentless" moment that subsumes past, present, and future into a meaningful and immediate whole.

#### NOTES

1. For a discussion of Jack Kerouac's haiku poetics in particular, see Regina Weinreich's introduction to Kerouac's *Book of Haikus*. Although Buddhist-inspired works can be found in numerous Beat anthologies, editor Carole Tonkinson's *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* devotes itself specifically to Beat texts, which contain Buddhist influences.

2. In "All things are different appearances of the same emptiness: Buddhism and Jack Kerouac's Nature Writings," Deshae E. Lott argues that "The meaning he derives [from nature] returns again and again to the Buddhist supra-rational void where everything is everything and where everything is empty" (183). Lott argues that Kerouac's view of *shunyata* "gives him new eyes when there's nowhere new in America to go," (183) but such a declaration sounds more like escapism than exploration. David Sterritt, in his book *Screening the Beats: Media Culture and the Beat Sensibility*, provides a rather terse chapter in which he draws some simple parallels between Kerouac's Buddhist *shunyata*, cinema, and dreams. For a discussion of *shunyata* in Ginsberg's work, see Tony Trigilio's "'Will You Please Stop Playing With the Mantra?': The Embodied Poetics of Ginsberg's Later Career," collected (along with Lott's article) in editor Jennie Skerl's *Reconstructing the Beats*.

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# 7

## Illumination Through the Cracks

*The Melting Down of Conventional Socio-Religious  
Thought and Practice in the Work of Gary Snyder*

TOM LAVAZZI

*Why do you think the old Zen worthies were always clowning around? . . .  
The biggest joke in the universe is that there's nothing to depend upon.<sup>1</sup>*

Aitken Roshi

American writers and intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s, seeking alternatives to conventional social and religious ideologies, often turned to the spiritual practices of local “others” as well as non-Western cultural traditions, from Native American shamanism and peyote rituals to Balinese theater and Zen tea ceremonies. Jerome Rothenberg’s *Technologies of the Sacred* and his translations of Native American poetry, *Shaking the Pumpkin*, for example, were published in 1968 and 1972, respectively. Rothenberg was also a leading figure (along with Nathaniel Tarn, Dennis Tedlock, Michel Benamou, Victor Turner, Gary Snyder, and others) in the development of ethnopoetics during the same decades; the “first international symposium of ethnopoetics,” forerunner of today’s Performance Studies International conferences, was held at the University of Wisconsin in 1975. Popularizations of Zen theory, such as Suzuki’s *Zen Minds, Beginner’s Mind* and Capra’s *Tao of Physics*, also began to appear in the 1970s, as did Richard

Schechner's foundational work in performance theory, finding paradigms for performance in non-Western ritual.

The impact of Zen philosophy and also Tantric Buddhism on Gary Snyder's poetry of the period was crucial, particularly in books such as *Riprap* (1959), *Regarding Wave* (1967), *The Back Country* (1968), *Turtle Island* (1974) and *The Old Ways* (1977). I have previously discussed the significance of Buddhism to Snyder's aesthetics, as well as to his social and political beliefs;<sup>2</sup> in this paper, I'd like to consider the dialogic engagement (the "internal polemic," to borrow Bakhtin's phrase) of Snyder's earlier, Zen-influenced work with a sociocultural system—a Symbolic Order—structured around conventional Judeo-Christian ideology. An important difference between the "new" or "emergent" forms of spirituality and established religion in postwar America, as it had become ossified, abstract, and deployed as pacifying support for the status quo, is the emphasis of the former on social engagement, a tendency apparent in more activist strains of Christianity (traceable, for example, in the work of Ted Berrigan) as well as non-Western forms of spirituality in 1960s. Like the work of other Beat-oriented poets of the period (notably Allen Ginsberg and Black Arts affiliated writers like Imamu Amiri Baraka), the aesthetic of Snyder's poetry deploys on both sociopolitical and spiritualistic fronts to realize a "revolution of consciousness," as he puts it in *Turtle Island* (*TI*, 101): in Zen, spirituality *is* praxis.

My main concern, then, is to consider how Snyder's textual performances, as well as his performance of a style of life (in Zen thought, the line between life and art blurs), enacts viable alternatives to more conventional, dualistic, disengaged religious and artistic practices as they had become codified in the modernist period, and how it shares concerns with the Deep Ecology and Ecotheology movements (as outlined, for example, in Lynn White's 1967 article for *Science*, "The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis") getting underway during the same period; hence, Snyder's postmodern turn—"the real work," as he phrases it in the *Turtle Island* ("I Went into the Maverick Bar") of his art and life—functions as a creative intervention into, as well as a spiritually heating up or revitalizing disturbance (dis/refiguration) of hegemonic modes of thought and religious and social practices. Such an approach to Snyder's art can also lead us into some surprising extra-literary places.

#### WRITING AS PRACTICE / PRAXIS

Coffeehouses and taverns have often marked the dialogic, socially situated beginnings of texts that have not been adequately recognized or

understood by academic historians, yet these texts remain vital and have actively engaged several generations of readers.

How shall we understand the texts of the author of *Myths and Texts*? Are they the words on the page, or are they the experiences transmitted through those words? Sensitivity to the chronically mutable, expansive nature of texts, via contacts with the surrounding culture and through what readers may bring to them has partly shaped the movement of the current writing. Gary Snyder's texts are extensions of the personal, the immediate, the bodily—the poet's voice in performance.<sup>3</sup> The texts, once we move beyond the idea that the printed page is the *real* text, become collaborations between writer and reader. Attention to the open-ended aspect of Snyder's work (as we take it in the ear and mind) opens a space for a reader's experience of the Zen-toned spirituality of the poems: *om mani* "jeweled-net-interpenetration-ecological-systems-emptiness-consciousness" *padme* in-the-Lotus *hum*, as the poet might intone it ("RE-inhabitation," *The Old Ways*, 64) O, the hyphenated word group (re)enacting the telescoping of perspectives (Buddhist, ecological), the splitting (open) of single-minded (i.e., self-substantial) identity.

At least since *Riprap* and *Riprap and the Cold Mountain Poems* (1959, 1965), Snyder has practiced articulating his life via his poems and vice versa. The aesthetic is holistic: the poems perform a lifework (hence he makes—has been making, since the mid 1950s—a case for the relevance of cultural studies). This means, of course, that Snyder's affinities (formal, intellectual, cultural), though trackable, are roundabout, out bounding.

If we start, say, by identifying Snyder as a Beat, he quickly slips us, not just because formally, for example, hallmark Beat stylistic maneuvers, such as Ginsberg's Blakeian apocalyptic chanting, keep it in close tension with a Judeo-Christian Biblical discourse, though torquing the latter to a mind-pattern breaking pitch, but because Snyder side-lined himself early in the movement. He left for Japan to study Zen Buddhism in spring 1956 and did not return to permanently settle in the States until 1969 (homesteading in Sierra Nevada foothills of the San Juan Ridge on 100 acres he and Ginsberg had purchased the in 1966, and where he continues to live, and practice, as a community/environmental activist, teacher, and poet). Beat is a point of contact/connection (if not contention) rather than identification. Following *that* Beat (Snyder's withdrawal and return) complicates the rhythm, challenging not only conventional definitions of poetry and poet at the time, but also the individual and the personal (again, part of the spirituality—the spiritual experience—of a Snyder poem is this clearing away of (preconception and definitiveness).

Let's take as another reference point, or point of entry, into the Snyder continuum: his 1990 essay "On the Path, Off the Trail" (*Practice of the Wild*). In this essay, Snyder narrates his experience with Zen Buddhism to show how getting off the path can often be the (necessary) path. Snyder first veered off the trail (of Western lifestyle, of the figure of the Poet as one who—just—writes) at 22, while working as a fire lookout in the North Cascades, when he decided to study Zen in Japan.<sup>4</sup> At 30, he looked down aisle of a Zen temple library, and realized he "should *not* live as monk" (*PW*, 152, italics mine). At the monastery, five hours of daily meditation were interspersed with chores—washing bowls, chopping firewood, farming; rooms were cold and food meager, and one got little sleep. The rhythm and conditions of the monk's lives were like those of the human net of farmers and workers surrounding them, with perhaps this difference: the door to the wild was through the routine and in the sitting—the repetition of quotidian tasks a kind of meditation, as *kōan* study, opening a space between/through. Dōgen writes: we "study the self in order to forget the self" and become "one with the ten thousand things" (qtd. in *PW*, 150). Repetition, the monotony of daily ritual, can lead to surprises if done mindfully; Snyder turned from monastic sanctuary back through not so much a Beat as Hip image of a countercultural lifestyle. Returning to the States, Snyder says, "wasn't just returning—the next step of my own practice was to be here."<sup>5</sup> Farming, tending trees, engaging in local politics and nonprofessional Buddhist practice, tending kids, chanting sutras, and, of course, writing poetry all became important parts of daily life. The poetry and the life are "always already" interwoven in the same net of praxis. And so one finds one's spirituality, and art, by the way—out of the (direct, "linear") way—but through the practice of life. Snyder quotes the *Dao De Jin* (Lao-zi's second-century-B.C. Chinese Daoist text): "A path that can be followed is not a *spiritual* path" (*PW*, 150).<sup>6</sup>

I began this discussion with reference to writing as a social act in ways that in some ways connect with ideas associated with Derridean deconstruction. Snyder tempers "French" attempts to "take the Word apart" with Thoreau's ideas of a "tawny grammar" (*PW*, 76), in which Snyder describes grammar as mark (*gramma techne*, "woven scratches"), but also event ("curl of breath," "breeze in the pines") (69). The "many-layered cosmos [sic] of the universe have found their own way into symbolic structure and have given us thousands of tawny human-[and other] language grammars" (*PW*, 77). Snyder, here, is working in a field associated with the LANGUAGE poets and with other avant-garde writers; one thinks of David Antin's impromptu "Talk Poems" as word events. Snyder combines the best of both: the Beat of the text in mind and ear, a transmission (to), exchange (with) the reader. In

an Anchorage bar, arguing Whorfian linguistics with a professor friend—what experience is not linguistically mediated?—Snyder bangs a heavy beer mug on the table (*PW*, 71). According to Dōgen, practice *is* path; not a path toward goal/end of progression (from-to, means-end), but a path that puts you out there; we must step away (a way) from the road to come home to the whole terrain.

Snyder's *Practice of the Wild* is full of such Zen *kōan*-like conundrums, in which words and concepts are themselves and not; nothing means just what it means, positions shift; drift as way: We must leave the (familiar) path to find our way home; paths are not (real-spiritual) paths; to "train" ("against the grain") is to untrain (92); to cultivate is to delimit, but one can also cultivate—that is, prepare a space for the reception of—the wild. Our little orders, compositions and arrangements glitter in a great wild context—"The ephemerality of all our acts puts us into a kind of wilderness-in time" (154); knowing this, even "tedious work around the house or office" can be "full of challenge and play" (153), if we know how (are "trained") to pass through to the "overarching wild systems" (93) a breath away from it. In the book, nothing (no concept) stays in place (a Zen aphorism: all conceptions are misconceptions), yet the book is very much about staying in place:<sup>7</sup> "every region has its wilderness. . . . The fire in the kitchen . . . the place less traveled" (28). The wilderness is everywhere around us if we are ready (mind-ready) to see it. As Snyder walks, talks (converses), *listens* through these pages, he is at home in his practice of language, a mindful praxis to achieve mindless entering into the other, and the vectors opened—not paths exactly but leads, pointings (as to the voice of the poet, the pop culture connections mentioned above, below, to various texts and lives).

#### POEM AND PLACE

Mountaineering, tracking, Snyder tells us in *Practice of the Wild*, rethinking his experiences as a fire lookout and hiking in the Pacific Northwest, is like poetry: it takes practice; self-abnegation, emptying. Backpacking over snow fields is an exercise in "structured attempts at having nothing"; losing yourself to come home more deeply/broadly. Breaking our egos over what is, Snyder emphasizes (paraphrasing Vimalakirti, a Buddhist layman) that we learn that we "had nothing from the beginning." A life devoted to "simplicity," "good humor," "unstinting work and play," and "lots of walking brings us close to actually existing world in its wholeness" (23); "people of wilderness cultures" risk themselves not for personal gain (as in Western "risk society"), but "for sake of whole" (23): this "etiquette of freedom" we learn from the wild (24). Lessons that are also the practice of poetry.

But what makes a poem-place sacred? It all has to do with a giving up the self over to the other. In “Good, Wild, Sacred,” Snyder describes time spent in Australia in 1981. He was invited by an aboriginal arts board to do some “teaching, poetry readings and workshops” (*PW*, 82), though, in the course of the narrative, we realize roles have reversed—Snyder becomes the listening, attentive student of the aboriginals. At one point, traveling along in a pick up truck toward a Pintubi sacred spot, an elder begins telling him stories about mountains they are passing, very rapidly—these are tales to be told while walking; he is sharing the lore with Snyder simply because, as Snyder plainly puts it, “I was there” (82), but the being there is all that matters. The elders provide a map of lore and song, which the young must memorize, Snyder elaborates. Song becomes their guide, their way back; so the songs serve practical but also imaginative purposes. Singing a cycle of songs, keeping time with a pair of boomerangs, and story telling around a camp fire near a sacred spot, the Pintubi revisit those places, keep them current, “walk through a space of desert in imagination and music” (braiding place, imagination, spirit; song, lore, myth, and cultural and geographic information) (83). One time, the elders took the poet to a sacred spot; the closer they got, the quieter their voices became, eventually whispering; movement also changed—they started walking upright, but crawled the final approach to the site—a rhythm of human dispersal into the “other.” They reversed their behavior on the way back, and when they reached the truck, the sacred spot was not mentioned again. Geo-place and poem-place (a mandala of voice, text, and land) are facets (glintings) of the total *mise en scene* of the sacred.<sup>8</sup> We begin to realize that Snyder’s writing, also, is a form of practice.

In the same essay Snyder points out that since early French and English explorers of North America brought “no teachings from the societies they left behind to urge them to look on wild nature with reverence,” a certain blindness, or inattention/disavowal has been a feature of the American relationship to nature since the country’s founding (89). By contrast, aboriginal worldviews—as Zen—teach a responsible, self-relating (rather than self-centered) attitude toward the “other”: the power that makes good land is Gaia, the whole network; to cultivate can also mean to cultivate out “delusive conditioning” (Chinese Daoism) (92). Buddhism, as Snyder says, allows for the ego but sees it as delusional; day-to-day practice is necessary to “cultivate” the wild, to produce *differently* (as, we might add, Snyder’s poetic practice leads us to read *differently*):<sup>9</sup> “day to day actualization of the vow [to work for insight] calls for practice.” Working with the environment, “training and culture . . . grounded in wild” (92), are “gates” to the “larger-than-human, larger than personal” (93). The sacred, as Snyder defines it

in *Practice of the Wild*, is that which takes us “out of our little selves into the whole mountains-and-river mandala universe” (94); backpacking up a trail into snowfields, tending a garden, peeling garlic, sitting on a meditation cushion, writing—all are the same practice, allowing intimate contact with “other.” And an understanding of place is awareness of all it has (ever-always) been: “Great Brown Bear is walking with us . . . as we stroll a city street” (94). The poem-image re(inter)connects.

Snyder closes this essay with his own place (which he calls *kitkitdizze*, the North American name for a local aromatic shrub—also called “miner’s misery”), concluding that it is “better left wild” (*PW*, 94). For the poet and his neighbors, the Sierra foothills became their teacher by their first act of “Taking [their] places” (*PW*, 95) in it; and their place is their praxis—as they work, struggle with it. And there are “sacred” spots: moon view spots, marriage spots, ceremonial spots to apologize for strip mining, conch blowing spots on Bodhi Day, children’s secret spots—spots for play, rites, social events, political acts, and some that lead out of (away from) the self (moon view spots) (95).<sup>10</sup>

The mental space may be similarly cultivated. Writing and reading *per se* are also the “real work”; that is, poetry is a way of bringing enlightenment to the “community” (*sangha*, in Zen) of readers, and of restoring wilderness to mind, hence of making sacred. Keeping this in mind, we can see how lifework and poetry work join cunningly in the poem “Riprap” (1958), in which the poet-worker is builder of imaginative and literal trails. Attending to things immediately at hand and necessary to the task at hand, the speaker commands us to participate in (imaginatively perform) this act of building toward something other than a literal trail: “Lay down these words / Before your mind like rocks.” Though the rocks/words are “placed solid,” within a few lines, they veer away from all practical functionality, giving way to “bark, leaf, or wall / riprap of things: / Cobble of milky way.” The mind now off the trail (though very much on the Way) touches on pack animals who also seem to be returning partially to the wild, “dragging saddles” and thence, rearranging the cobbles another way, to an ancient Chinese path-building game of strategy, the “four-dimensional / Game of Go.” Then, following the pebble-dot full stop, we go back under the initial immediate trail to “ants and pebbles” (since ants also form other-than-human, bio-driven networks).

Yet all of this is, non-contradictorily, “rocky sure-foot trails”; though the poem reads “*and* rocky sure-foot trails,” suggesting concomitance rather than self-identity, everything slips into/through everything else in the poem, self-identical at a glimpse then not, so we can have it both ways (both/and), each and neither, all and nothing. Note the pebble

punctuations: single dot, step to step, full stop—toward the beginning, just past the middle, and end of the poem—following “rocks,” “sure-foot trails,” “Game of [i.e. with—some kind of—rules] Go,” and finally, “things”; colons, double shift, one thing leading to quite another: following telescoping “in space and time:” to “riprap of things:” to “Cobble of the milky way,” then the commas that allow us to hang for a moment on the end of a line, then slipslide into the next thought place: “straying planets, / These poems, people, / lost ponies with / Dragging saddles.”

In his 1960 “Statement on Poetics,” accompanying the selection of his works in Donald Allen’s seminal anthology *New American Poetry*, Snyder comments, “I’ve recently come to realize that the rhythms of my poems follow the rhythm of the physical work I’m doing and life I’m leading at any given time—which makes the music in my head which creates the line.”<sup>11</sup> Vectoring from (through) the “life” and the “work,” the “music” and the “line” take us in directions that offset a too easy, mimetic reading of this reflection. The poem ends, if it can, way off the trail and deep within it, in the grain of the granite bedrock underlying the trail (and perhaps ingrained in rocks on the trail), in a kind of ghost trace/trail of a prehuman/preterhuman (of course pre-Christian) past, surely placing the mind in a moment of creation that has much to do with our immediate ground and little with conventional Judeo-Christian creation myths:

Granite: ingrained  
 with torment of fire and weight  
 Crystal and sediment linked hot  
 all change, in thoughts,  
 As well as things.

As Snyder says elsewhere in *Riprap*: “No paradise, no fall / only the weathering land / the wheeling sky” (“Milton by Firelight,” 8).

As the poetry has led us (back) to another part of our theme, we can add another cobble here: Lynn White’s 1967 article for *Science*, “The Historic Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” which kicked off the Deep Ecology and Ecotheology movements in much the same way that the ’55 Six Gallery reading spurred new directions in American poetry. Both literary events registering (counter)cultural tremors that are still being felt.

Clearing a way for the critical praxis of Ecotheology, White’s article reevaluates several defining characteristics of the Judeo-Christian attitude toward environment, such as a belief in linear time, emphasizing progress, time as experienced historically with distinct beginnings and endings, the creation story progressing toward “Man” as fulfillment, rather than cyclical time tied to natural seasons;<sup>12</sup> an emphasis on anthropocentrism in

which man dominates, and tames, nature (White, 1205), deploying agriculture as a technology of control and production—the classical idea of “stewardship”—as opposed to a nonanthropocentric attitude toward the relationship of humankind to its natural “other,” as in Daoism’s yin-yang or Wu Wei—“acting in accord with nature” (Strada, 60). Other ecologically problematic attitudes deriving from Judeo-Christian thought, according to White, include the emphasis on miracles—the will of God “bending laws of nature” (Strada, 60)—and taxonomic, hierarchic, dualistic thinking. From this perspective, conventional religious attitudes often support the status quo, a patriarchic system of governance and the interests of industry, since they share the same basic Western anthropocentric mindset.

As (counter)evidence of an embedded, eco (v. ego)centric attitude toward the environment, Ecotheologists, from White on, have offered rereadings of traditional theological sources. Susan Bratton claims that “many Christians . . . favor what might best be termed ‘environmental denial’”<sup>13</sup> and that the orthodox church lacks an adequate stance toward population growth, as well as toward environmentally irresponsible applications of science and technology (par. 8), largely due to a lack of “self-reflection both on our social and scientific history” and to a deeply held “Protestant value” of “egalitarian individualism” based in self-interest rather than a “respect for others” (pars. 30, 24), Ecotheological revisionists (if not theological apologists) claim that such a stance is doctrinal more than scriptural. Biblical (re)readings can lead us in a different direction, depending on which sections of Genesis one focuses.

For example, instead of Genesis 1: 26–31, centering on the creation of human beings, Ecotheologists highlight 1: 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, in which “God honors other parts of the created order” than the human “by calling them good”;<sup>14</sup> other passages in Genesis emphasize the “ecological dimensions of sin” (3.14, 17–18, 24; 2.4–25; 9.1–3) (Dutney 25).<sup>15</sup> The Psalms are cited as other scriptural evidence giving “voice” to nature in the glorifying of God (19:1; 104: 24, 31) (Dutney 24). Still other passages in the Bible suggest the “ecological unity of redemption.” In Romans 8.19–23; Paul 8.11, 21, for example, “creation itself,” and not just human kind, is “set free from its bondage” through the resurrection of Christ; New Testament John 1.1–3, Colossians 1.15–20 and Ephesians 1.10, refigure Christ as a kind of Gaia, the “Logos” signifying the whole of the creative order, rather than an anthropomorphic reinscription, or imposition, of “God’s image” on humanity (Dutney 26). Ecotheologists also point to examples of saints, such as St. Francis of Assisi, the “greatest radical in Christian history since Christ,” according to Lynn White (1206), since his example led to the “Franciscan doctrine of the animal soul” (Sir Steven Ruciman, qtd.

in White, 1207).<sup>16</sup> Beyond the scholarship,<sup>17</sup> more activist Ecotheological organizations such as the National Religious Partnership for the Environment or NRPE (including the National Council Churches, the Coalition on the Environ and Jewish Life, and the Evangelical Environmental Network) have issued statements about the problem of “exponential pop growth” and the degradation of natural resources and have called for “mobilizing the community to practice environmental sustainability” (from the founding statement of COEJL; Wanderer Forum Foundation, par.2, II,A.2), issuing “parish resource kits” to help achieve this goal.<sup>18</sup>

This awareness of (self)responsibility to a larger network of life is abundantly evident in *Practice of the Wild*. An important symptom of altered consciousness, a sign of awareness stemming from the acts of attention, or turnings on/tunings in, Snyder describes in the book (see above) is a felt understanding of the need for grace, a simple gesture of recognition and thanks for, as Snyder quotes from a Buddhist grace, “the work of many people / and the sharing of other forms of life” that provide an everyday meal. Far and away from the conventional Christian grace, in which thanks is due to a third, mediating force who gives it (all) to us, the Buddhist thanksgiving is based on keen insight and empathy with the other/food; in the Buddhist grace, we come to know those life forms that sustain us, through an imaginative and ritual act, not just in an objective sense (chosen, cooked, and consumed), but in (and as) themselves (we appreciate the other “for itself,” as Hegel might term such imaginative convergence of the self and not self in a relationship of mutual support). The NRPE would find a Snyder poem quite at home in one of its “resource kits.”

The Zen influenced habit of mind and self-relating style of life (“Reinhabitation,” as he terms in *The Old Ways*, 62) that Snyder began articulating through poetry, public, and private action in the late 1950s and into the 1960s—his lifework, the “real work”—prefigures the basic tenets of both the Ecotheology and Deep Ecology movements. According to Alan Drengson, “ecophilosophy” refers to a cooperative relationship between “place, self, community, and natural world.” Deep Ecology (DE), a phrase coined by Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer Arne Naess in 1973, is a type of ecophilosophy, or “ecosophy” (“ecological wisdom,” as Drengson puts it), that emphasizes deep questioning, a consideration of the long term effects of our actions on the ecosystem, over shallow (utilitarian, immediate) interests. Similar to Buddhist thought, the DE movement is comprehensive and holistic, recognizing four levels of discourse: “Ultimate Premises” (the philosophical groundwork that predisposes one to deep ecological thinking),<sup>19</sup> “Platform Principles” (articulating an awakened, self-aware relationship among the individual, society, and the

environment—see below), “Policies,” and “Practical Actions” (Drengson, par. 7). The eight Platform Principles<sup>20</sup> include nurturing the “flourishing human and nonhuman life” (regardless of their “usefulness”), recognizing the “richness and diversity of life forms,” being aware of the coexistence and thriving of human life and culture along with the nonhuman, understanding the need to create ideological change—an appreciation for “life quality” rather than a “higher standard” of living (living “great” rather than “big”) and that consciousness = Conscientiousness—taking on the mandate to act, directly and/or indirectly, to implement changes (Drengson, par.13).<sup>21</sup> In Deep Ecology, as in Ecotheology and in Snyder’s “real work,” the key is “Self-realization!” (Drengson, par. 17): giving over the small ego self to the larger, ecologically attuned Self, the exclamation point drawing attention to Naess’ main point—the movement is a call to (mind-altering) action.

We can see how the mindset of Snyder’s poetry echoes (on and off the trail) such ecological principles; a poem like “Riprap,” a touchstone for ET and DE deep thinking, could not be further from conventional religious modes of thought and interpretations of nature in the 1960s, as outlined by White’s article, above. In “Riprap” linearity, anthropocentrism, and hierarchic and taxonomic modes of order are all called into question. Even a nature-spiritualizing gesture, in both the conventional Judaic and Anglo-American senses, is avoided, in as much “Riprap” is very uncabalistic in the openendedness, fluidity, and un/insubstantiality of its readings of the other, refusing to close on meaning or construct spiritual equations of the real. The poem is a kind of clear, hard (as the speaker suggests at the outset) training (ground), yet quite simple and easy, if we accept its way of seeing (it’s not the way that contains obstacles, as Snyder emphasizes in many of his writings—we get in our own way); a training that begins with the significance of work done in the real world. The act of riprap is at once practical and spiritual, a socioeconomic act and an ecological one (inasmuch as riprap works with the given contours of the terrain and inhibits nonorganic—specifically, nonbiologic—forms of travel/transport). Pausing, on (an)other’s words, we might close this discussion of poem with the *kōan* Snyder cites to close “Survival and Sacrament” in *Practice of the Wild*: “A monk asked Dong-shan: ‘Is there a practice for people to follow?’ / Dong-shan answered: ‘When you become a real person, there is such a practice’” (*PW*, 185).

Cobbling most of our paths are everyday household rituals. “The Bath” (*TI*, 12), as a poem-stone, grasps the significance of one such moment. As the poem begins, Snyder narrates bathing himself and his infant son; when his then-wife, Masa, enters the bath, it becomes something more than a family affair (though it is that). As I describe this in “Pattern of Flux”:

Snyder reaches out to “cup” Masa’s “curving vulva from behind,” and the contact sends a current of awareness through him, a mute, preverbal message: the vulva becomes “a hand of grail” (not “like” one—the identification is immediate and actual), which evokes the visionary image of a “turning double-mirror world of / wombs in wombs, in rings, / that start in music, / is this our body?” (44)

As soon as Snyder makes physical contact with the human part-object, the poem’s imagery and syntax begin to leap, as narrative structure is temporarily suspended.

Snyder’s poetry typically subvert illusory oppositions to reveal, instead, nuances and patterns of relationship. Consider poems such as “Vapor Trails” (*The Back Country; No Nature*, 213) and “I Went into the Maverick Bar” (*TI*, 9): Both poems divert potential dualisms into a Zen no-conflict zone (Whalen-Bridge 1990). The former poem opens with the perception of “Twin streaks twice higher than cumulus”—the exhaust tracings of fighter jets—like “icetracks” across the “field of all future war,” *and* (not but) ends with the recognition of another design: watching for—and spotting—two-leaf pine; the image parallelism is suggestive, nonjudgmental (perhaps frustratingly so for those of us less able to let go). In “I Went into the Maverick Bar,” the speaker, watching a couple dancing, how they “held each other like in High School dances / in the fifties,” enjoys an image of “short-haired joy and roughness” remembered from his own youth; once outside again, back on the road (the “freeway”)

under the tough old stars  
In the shadows of bluffs  
I came back to myself,  
To the real work, to  
“What is to be done.”

Which has little to do with the bar, and everything to do with the lifework. Yet the different worlds/awarenesses, the self-involved world of the Maverick Bar and the Self-realizing one where the real work gets done are both places of/in mind that nature, that language creating the image of nature, brings him back to inhabit nonreductively, the space of the poem. Snyder’s “Freeway” points to Snyder’s 1960’s apostasy, his abandoning the conventional “Path” of socioreligious thought in the double-mirror world practice of his life and poetry, a path that is itself a destination, a dialogic space in the imagination for acts of critical consciousness. This is the practice of *sunyata*, as Julia Martin explains it: the *Madhyamika* Buddhist concept that “nothing . . . exists as a separate entity, a separate essence: all things are

‘marked by emptiness,’ which does not mean “blank nothingness,” since “the existence of each [thing—object, word] is conditioned and informed by the existence of everything else” (Martin, 10). This emptiness involves a “certain lightness in attitude” (Martin, “Practicing Emptiness,” 11) , a lack of attachment that “can understand both sides of a question anytime” (Martin, “Coyote Mind,” 171).

As Snyder puts it in *Turtle Island*: “the path is whatever passes—no / end in itself” (“Without,” 6).

#### NOTES

1. Aitken, 108; qtd. In Martin, 11.
2. See my previous articles on Gary Snyder’s poetry, as noted in Works Cited.
3. Or on tape, as I brought it in to play during the first “official” performance of this essay, at an MLA conference held in New Orleans; I will have to ask you to imagine it here, or read a poem from *Regarding Wave* or *The Back Country* out loud before continuing with this reading, or recall that voice in live reading, if you have been fortunate to attend one; or go to Wired for Books—wiredforbooks.org/gary snyder—and listen to Don Swain’s 1991 interview with the poet.
4. *Practice of the Wild*, 151; Hereafter, *PW*.
5. *The Real Work*; qtd. In Murphy, 224.
6. “Dao,” as Snyder points out, is ambiguous, signifying the way of art, of life, of nature (*PW*, 145).
7. One could also say the book is about doing/knowing one’s “groundwork,” to borrow poet Robert Duncan’s term.
8. Aesthetically, many of Snyder’s poems function as mandalas, repeating, veering away from, circling around and back to certain words, phrase, images. The spiral, or torsion form, is one example. See my *APR* article, “The Torsion Form . . .”
9. As does much of poststructuralist criticism. See, for example, Robert Magliola’s discussions of the relationships between various schools of Buddhist thought and Derridian deconstruction, in books such as *Derrida on the Mend* (1985) and *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture* (1997), though some scholars criticize him for a reductionist treatment of the former (see John Keenan’s review of the latter book, followed by Magliola’s response, in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*). One of Magliola’s main points in *On Deconstructing Life Worlds* is that schools of Indian thought such as Prasangika Madhyamika, and especially philosophers like Nagarjuna, are concerned, much as Derrida is concerned, with the emptying of all concepts and identity constructions, which they attempt to realize in both the content and style of their writings, Nagarjuna’s rhetoric in *Stanzas in the Middle*, for

example, moving with a restlessness similar to Derrida's prose. Writing here, too, is a performance of self, a social praxis in its manner of engagement with readers, leading readers out of themselves (a self-centered sense of self) into something more expansive, wilder. For more on the relationship between Derridean and Buddhist critiques of logocentric language, especially as regards the constructivist role of self-centered subjects (i.e., constituting language *in the name of* . . .), see Harold Coward's article "Derrida and Bhartrhari's Vākyapadīya on the Origin of Language."

10. Away from a self-centered self, but into the daily and seasonal rhythms that bind humans and nature; the latter also has a resonance within Japanese and Chinese cultures; both have moon view, or harvest festivals—Japanese *Otsukimi*—usually on the full moon nearest the Autumn equinox, during which various offerings are made, including rice cakes, watermelons, chestnuts, and Japanese potatoes, in thanks for the late summer harvests.

11. *The New American Poetry*, 420; Qtd. in Selby, 182.

12. White, 1205; see also Michael Strada, 59–60.

13. See "Christianity and Reflexive Modernity: Population, Environmental Risk, and Social Change," 1996, par. 3.

14. See Peter J. Hill, "Environmental Theology," par. 11; Andrew Dutney (25).

15. Though in many revisionist readings of Genesis *both* humankind and nature have fallen and need improvement, the emphasis is still on humans—human fall and redemption taking priority—and the ideological brotherhood is kept intact. The real problem, of course, is not that humankind and nature fall together, or that the Bible includes much evidence of the "ecological dimensions of sin," but that it is thought of as a fall, at all.

16. White mentions possible connections to the thirteenth century Cathar Heretics in Italy and South France, who believed in reincarnation, and early Christian agnostics (White, 1207)

17. For a compelling (re)reading of Trinitarian doctrine, from a deconstructionist (rather than ecotheological) point of view, see Robert Magliola's *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture* (note 9 above), which explores connections between "Trinitarian thinking" and Derridean alterity. Such a perspective also challenges concepts of unitary subjecthood that support conventional Christian attitudes toward the environment.

18. For example, the NRPE houses the Gaia Institute at the Episcopal Cathedral of St. John the Divine in NYC; a typical parish resource kit, "Renewing the Face of the Earth," intended to build socio-environmental (critical) consciousness and to illustrate globally sustainable lifestyles, includes articles and videos on birth control and family planning, women's rights to effect responsible decision making in terms of childrearing and parenting, the importance of alleviation of poverty, global warming and biodiversity loss; the kit also includes a "Penetential

[sic] Litany” —“how many species must we abuse and extinguish . . . O god, we ask forgiveness”) II,C.2; III,B.3,a.

19. Similar to Yippie sociopolitical theory developing around the same time, Naess’ thought offered no ultimate—or blanket—“Ultimate Premise,” no “correct” or “right” starting point. It is up to each individual to find his/her way into Deep Ecological thought and practice through his/her particular ideological (fore)ground. For Naess, this was Taoism and Ecosophy—specifically, what he terms “ecosophy T.” The “T” represents his mountain retreat in Norway—the place of its theoretical development and practice—and is an acronym for Norwegian *tolkning*, or “interpretation” (Dregnsen. Par. 15). ET, then, is a way of seeing and doing, based, according to Dregnsen, in *friluftsliv* (a Norwegian back-to-nature movement), “Gandhian nonviolence, Mahayana Buddhism and Spinozan pantheism” (par. 15).

20. Formulated by Naess and George Sessions while on a hiking trip in Death Valley in 1984; see Naess’ *Deep Ecology*, 1985.

21. Dregnsen reports that Naess was “a supporter of the eco-feminist, social ecology, social justice, bioregional and peace movements” (par 20). Given the platform principles, we can see why.

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# 8

## The American Poetic Diamond Vehicle

*Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman  
Re-work Vajrayana Buddhism*

JANE AUGUSTINE

Three twentieth century events accelerated the penetration of Buddhist culture into American life that had begun in the early nineteenth century: the “Westernization” of post–World War II Japan, the conquest of Tibet by Communist China in 1959, and U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War from 1961 until 1975. In that period, Zen teachers and Asian intellectual, religious and cultural refugees poured into the United States, and the stream has continued. When asked in 1976 why he came to the West, Rikpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, head of the Kagyü lineage of Tibetan lamas, said: “If there is a lake, the swans would go there” (HSCL xii).

One of those refugees was Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939–1987), also a Tibetan lama of the Kagyü lineage. When the Chinese invaded his country in 1959, he was twenty-one years old and abbot of Surmang monastery in eastern Tibet. He escaped, leading a large party of monks over the Himalayas in an eight-month-long, immensely difficult trek, costly in lives, to arrive in India in early 1960. From there he made his way to England, where he studied at Oxford from 1963 to 1966 and thoroughly mastered the English language (CTLV 17). In 1967 he established in Scotland

a meditation center, Samye Ling, that approximated the monastery he had left behind. In 1969 he shocked Samye Ling by leaving it and leaving the monastic life altogether. An automobile accident that paralyzed his left side had sent him, he felt, an unmistakable symbolic message: he was proceeding in the wrong way. He realized that he could better teach the Vajrayana, a highly refined fusion of Indian Mahayana Buddhism, Tantra, and Tibet's native shamanist religion Bön, if he lived the same life as ordinary people, just as an ordinary man without the image of "monk" and the exotic Tibetan trappings that overly fascinated students in the West. He married a young Englishwoman, Diana Pybus, and came to America in 1970 (*BIT* 252, *CTLV* 5, 64–65).

In New York, in that same year, Allen Ginsberg met him. The story is charming. Several biographical accounts record it, but Barry Miles' *Ginsberg: A Biography* has the most accurate version, as Ginsberg retold it himself in person. The poet was walking with his father Louis on a hot late summer's day in Manhattan, when his father suddenly felt weak, affected by the heat. Ginsberg thought he ought to get the old man quickly to a hospital. In a familiar New York scenario, he hailed a cab at the moment as a short, solidly built, crippled "oriental gentleman." Ginsberg stepped up, saying "Can I steal your vehicle?" and explained that his father was ill. Kunga Dawa, Trungpa's Scottish assistant who was with him, recognized the poet, and introduced them (*G* 437–438).

In his retellings of this story, Ginsberg emphasized his accidental choice of the word "vehicle" instead of the more usual "cab" or "taxi." Since vehicle translates the Sanskrit term *yana* as in Mahayana, the Great Vehicle and Vajrayana, the Diamond Vehicle, the poet believed that his word-choice was no accident but rather an "auspicious coincidence," a phrase Trungpa often used, translating the Tibetan *tendrel* an unpredetermined but fitting confluence of karmic forces. The poet and the guru became friends and by 1972, each other's teachers as well. Trungpa asked Ginsberg to be his poetry guru, and the poet asked Trungpa to be his meditation guru—"we made a little deal" (*G* 450). Shortly thereafter, Ginsberg took the basic vow of refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha—that is, in the teacher, the teachings and the students, potentially all sentient beings—and the Mahayana bodhisattva vow not to give up working to benefit beings until all are free from suffering and have attained enlightenment. Of this vow he said, "I felt I was already on my road and this was merely like a formulation, in classical terms, of what was already my intuitive desire" (*G* 444).

Trungpa embodied the particular approach within Vajrayana called "Crazy Wisdom," a radical openness to experience beyond any conventions, without assumptions or prescriptions of any kind, even those—or

perhaps especially those—of institutionalized Buddhism. But he taught the traditional three-yana system of buddhadharma as he had been taught, using the ancient texts of the Kagyü and Nyingma lineages of Tibet, which he carefully translated. These are rooted in the foundation teachings of the earliest schools of Buddhism, one of which migrated to Southeast Asia and became present-day Theravada while another later went to Tibet and became historically labeled Hinayana, “lesser path.” There is nothing lesser about it, and Trungpa taught it as the essential base. He retranslated the term Hinayana as the “foundation path” or “basic path,” on which the “wide path” of Mahayana is built, from which super-Mahayana, the Vajrayana, expands. It is one path, and the key practices for realization are simple and direct *shamatha* and *vipashyana*, mindfulness and awareness. The Kagyü approach, said Trungpa—and Ginsberg heard him say it in a seminary talk that was later transcribed—“surprisingly close to the Theravadin order” of Southeast Asia and “quite equally we could say it is close to the Soto Zen tradition of Japan” (73 *ST* 2). He repeatedly told his students to sit a lot and get in touch with their own minds, otherwise they wouldn’t understand anything at all (e.g., *GS* 7–8, 87; *SBW* 63, *MM* xv).

Although Trungpa taught from traditional sources, he was also entirely *au courant* with contemporary issues and a cutting-edge modern thinker who had a practical vision of an enlightened society. In that vision art plays an essential role, which is one of the reasons that Ginsberg and the younger poet Anne Waldman, along with a number of other artists and writers, were attracted to him and to buddhadharma. Here was an alternative to American materialist, puritanical and anti-art attitudes and to disastrous American politics, notably the Vietnam war, all of which were producing enormous suffering worldwide. It is the same suffering that, two millenia earlier, had opened the eyes of the young prince Shakyamuni, and set him on the path.

The “Crazy Wisdom” approach, with its radical openness to experience, suggested to these poets a powerful way to address that suffering by looking at the world’s realities as the “play of phenomena” and at their own thoughts as insubstantial yet clearly present in the clear light nature of mind. Such an approach offered the possibility of looking into one’s mind with suspended judgment about whatever rage, fear, greed, or lust might be found there. It suggested that although one might be embroiled in politics and history, tangled in concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, one could at the same time let go of dualistic thinking so that the vivid qualities of things in themselves—their color, shape, texture—could be released, naturally transformed into creative energy.

Sitting is essential to realizing this transformation, because the crazy wisdom path requires going “further in and in and in,” deeper and deeper,

beyond conventional views of “real” and “unreal,” of goodness or badness, beyond “any reference point of spirituality” (CW 10). Then it is possible to reach the basic “sanity we are born with”—Trungpa’s phrase. It was his aim to bring people closer to the reality of themselves, which is that they possess this “basic state of mind that is clear and pure and natural,” as he said in his foreword to *Mahamudra* by Tashi Namgyal (1512–1587). “The realization of that basic state of mind is what is known as mahamudra” (MM xv). Mahamudra is part of the “indestructible path” of Vajrayana, the “diamond vehicle.” The Sanskrit *vajra*, diamond connotes both its qualities of hardness—nothing can destroy it—and brilliant clarity. Vajra also means “thunderbolt,” symbolically the lightning shock of instantaneous insight, a moment of revealing that clear pure mind. This moment is not mystical or ineffable or rare. The moments of catching on to the reality of what is happening occur all the time in daily life but are intermittent, usually passing unnoticed.

The path of Vajrayana, including Mahamudra, is to take notice, to become fully aware of and to cultivate that habit until it is so deeply ingrained that it goes unnoticed itself. Luminous mind is always there, like the sky unchanged by the clouds in it, according to a traditional image. Clouds or obscurations in the mind do not change mind’s basic nature, which is called “basic goodness” in Trungpa’s teachings on Shambhala, the enlightened society, and is called “Buddha-nature” in the older texts. Another analogy describes the mind or self as a Buddha-statue made of pure gold but covered with so much dirt and filth that it is unrecognizable. The goal of the path is to clear the clouds of preconception and to wash away the filth, as we shall see, to uncover the pure uncontaminated nature of oneself and the world. That uncovering happens in sitting when one sees directly what is here in the present moment.

For Ginsberg, born in 1926, that way of clear seeing in its multiple dimensions was confirmed by a vision of William Blake that came to him in 1948 when he was a student at Columbia University. He thought he saw God, and, while he then misspent fifteen years in searching to duplicate that vision with drugs, it was nevertheless a romantic mystical true moment that awakened in him the inborn view of the world as sacred and himself, the Jewish boy from New Jersey, sacred as well, self and world inseparable in all their discrepancies and incompatibilities. A philosophizing poem he wrote in 1950, “The Terms in Which I Think of Reality,” reveals the Vajrayana view manifest in him from the beginning. The poem is laid out as logic in three parts, labeled (a) (b) and (c), expressed in William Carlos Williams’s short lines and in his mode of direct observation, and it can be seen as a manifesto without that label. It reveals the intention that runs throughout his poetic oeuvre. He wants to see and create an enlarged and

comprehensive reality. Even in these early literary beginnings, his intelligence is opening to a world seen as both beautiful and ugly, and he wonders what to do with it. He is stating the subject of his poetry.

“Reality is a question/ of realizing how real/ the world is already” is the poem’s opening line. The emphasis is interior, on the mental act of “realizing,” but the first things to be realized are that “Time is Eternity,” a conceptual impossibility, and “everyone’s an angel.” These represent “heaven’s mystery/ of changing perception.” The poet observes: “absolutely Eternity changes!” Ordinary things change, too, in fact and perception. Cars move up and down the streets and lamps go on and off in houses, and an ordinary table top is a great flat plain where “we can see everything.” It is a landscape of spread-out fields as if seen by an aerial camera, which then zooms back in to the table where clams are opening up, ready to be consumed at the same time that dead “lambs are eaten by worms/ on the plain.” Now the kaleidoscopic camera develops X-ray vision of continuing internal, sometimes quite nasty processes. “Worms” with its Biblical ring—“I am a worm and no man”—becomes a favored Ginsberg word along with angel, heaven and soul to express flesh and spirit, rotten messiness and inspired vision as indiscriminately and appreciatively mixed. The section ends with the assertion that the “motion of change,” of being born and of dying, is beautiful, and that the forms “called in and out of being” are beautiful, too.

Section (b) moves from generalization about change—the equivalent of the Mahayana *dōndam*, absolute reality—to the particulars of the process, the relative reality, *kundzöp*, of everyday life. He states his mission for poetry: to initiate “gratifying new changes/ desired in the real world.” But he is overwhelmed as he takes a concrete look at the unpleasant details, worms feasting on rot, and multiplied devastations everywhere. For a moment he is tempted to go on dreaming of Heaven, since “the world is a mountain/ of shit.” But then he declares that if this mountain is to be moved at all, it will have “to be taken by handfuls,” an echo of the old slogan that faith moves mountains. A daring faith is revealed: the poem can take a handful of the world’s shit and transform it. In Trungpa’s terms, the shit is the “manure of experience,” the composted pileup of one’s dirty, smelly inner garbage of desire and passions, which, through meditation, is transformed into fertilizer for “the field of bodhi” out of which grows the crop of enlightened action (*MIA* 19–23). In the traditional metaphor and iconic image, the beautiful lotus of enlightenment grows out of the muck.

The muck—in Buddhist terms, *samsara*, the cycle of human suffering—is exemplified in the last section of Ginsberg’s poem by the whore’s miserable life as he observed it in an actual woman seen on River Street

in his home town, Paterson, New Jersey. He sees her as stigmatized for “seeking physical love/ the best way she knows how.” It is a romanticized view of the prostitute’s life, but he sees her as fully human, like himself, capable of choice, with sexual yearning as a natural, irrepressible component of her humanity, as it is of his own. So, he asks implicitly, how has she gotten trapped in the muck of degraded circumstances? Why doesn’t she know a better way to get what she wants? He thinks it is because she has “never really heard of a glad/ job or joyous marriage or/ a difference in the heart.” But maybe “her worst misery” comes from her fixed mind-set that says the happy life is “not for her.” The phrase is ambiguous, possibly the victim’s acceptance of class exclusion but possibly a deluded choice not to embrace the bourgeois life-style. It doesn’t really matter. The mind-set is the problem and the cause of the suffering to which he wants to put an end in a gratifying new change. He wants poetry to bring about the transformative “difference of heart.”

His method developed from the view and intent to “realize how real/ the world is already.” It was a simple method of direct perception, the analog of the internal process of meditation: he just recorded the realities of his daily life, observations, thoughts, memories, visions, in seeming random access, going along with them. At the same time he could also instantly access an inner storehouse of interconnected words and energies. In the transcendent “Howl”—“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness”—he steps mentally into the shoes of his mad friend Carl Solomon to state his own *modus operandi*. He, like Solomon, is the one

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images  
juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between two visual  
images and joined the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of  
consciousness together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens  
Aeterna Deus . . .

. . . confessing out the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought in  
his naked and endless head . . .

the madman bum and angel beat in Time, yet putting down what  
might be left to

say in time to come after death . . . (CP 126–131)

In this explosive yet celebratory cry of pain, Ginsberg fuses language, memory and free-associative consciousness of the human realities. He never forgets suffering; it is the basic engine that drives his compassionate protest. His “naked and endless head” is both literal and metaphoric site of boundlessly creative ultimate space in which all phenomena arise. The vibrant clarity

of “Howl”’s images juxtaposed act out in jazz-music terms the nonconceptual Vajrayana fact of the equal nature of all things when they are seen as they are (KS 14). Incorporating this realization into poetry, Ginsberg not only changed poetry but the language and life of America itself. He talked about sex openly, without hypocrisy under the primary Vajrayana rubric: drop concept, see things as they are, innately pure. At the same time they have to be seen as a mess that needs fixing. So he put his “queer shoulder to the wheel,” as he promised at the end of his famous poem “America” (CP 148).

And he had confidence that he would continue to have something “left to say in time to come after death.” The changes set in motion by his poetry have a continuity—“thread,” the Tibetan word for Tantra—that also seems to have some indestructibility. He died in the early morning of April 5, 1997, almost exactly ten years after the death of Trungpa Rinpoche on April 4, 1987. A few weeks earlier, on February 22, when he knew he was dying, he wrote “Death & Fame,” which was published in the *New Yorker* of April 21, 1997 (78–81). David Remnick, the magazine’s editor, wrote an obituary tribute, “Kaddish,” immediately preceding the poem, and said, “The distinguishing feature of Ginsberg’s character was his generosity, his sweetness, his openness”—Mahayana traits that the poet projected in person, with his balding head, unruly salt-and-pepper beard, one eyelid drooping as he peered out of or over thick-lensed glasses to speak with gentleness and genuine interest to anyone who happened by. The poem shows him as Remnick described him, sweet and open, and, as his friend and care-giver Bob Rosenthal wrote, displaying “honest regrets and true Buddhist ability to let go” (DF 104). At the same time Ginsberg recognized with a naive pleasure that he had brought about what he wanted: the crucial “difference in the heart” for many people, known to him and unknown.

“When I die/ I don’t care what happens to my body . . . But I want a big funeral,” he says, and names dozens of relatives, friends, companions, caregivers, meditation teachers alive and dead—“Trungpa Vajracharya’s ghost mind”—in a crowded, grand mystical procession. After these come as “most important,” his lovers over half a century, whose thoughts he projects realistically in words that they might have spoken to one another, not always flatteringly, of their time with him,

“He taught me to meditate, now I’m an old veteran of the thousand day retreat—”

“I played music on subway platforms, I’m straight but loved him he loved me”

“I was lonely never in bed nude with anyone before, he was so gentle . . .

Among lovers one handsome youth straggling the rear

“I studied his poetry class, 17-year-old kid, ran some errands to his walkup flat, seduced me, didn’t want to, made me come, went home, never saw him again never wanted to . . .”

“He couldn’t get it up but loved me,” “A clean old man,” “He made sure I came first”

This the crowd most surprised proud at ceremonial place of honor—

“Surprised” because sex is sin in America, and Ginsberg keeps saying, as he always has, sex and love are inseparable. He is pointing again to the reasons why his poetry is greatly loved and he has become an icon: he valorizes sex, the body, and the day-to-day processes of physical life, insisting that they are not separate from spiritual life. He continually sees and asserts the continuum of erotic passion in its many transformations from the raw sex act into the refinements of the making of art.

In the next outer circle of this imaginary cathedral mandala come his fans among artists and musicians, a mixed bag including “Italian romantic realists,” high school teachers, “ladies of either sex,” mild lunatics—“Nervous breakdown after menopause, his poetry humor saved me from suicide hospitals”—and students. He paraphrases readers’ letters that told him how much they were affected by his poetry and himself as its presenter in person:

Thousands of readers, “Howl” changed my life in Libertyville, Illinois.”

“I saw him read Montclair State Teachers college decided be a poet—”

“He turned me on, I started with garage rock sang my songs in Kansas City”

To be turned on to art is not very different from being turned on to sex—it is part of the continuum. As sex is a taboo subject for Americans, so is death. Ginsberg broke that taboo as well to open reservoirs of feeling and the deepening of relationship:

“Kaddish’ made me weep for myself & father alive in Nevada City”

“Father Death’ comforted me when my sister died Boston 1982”

He is naming those poems he knows are his greatest, “Howl” and “Kaddish.” They opened up the third taboo subject: madness. It takes sanity to register insanity. Ginsberg’s inherently large view of the “equal nature of all things” lets him see clearly, and thus the counterweight of humor comes into his poems. Although his record of his mother’s deterioration is horrific,

sometimes unbearable to read, at other times it's funny, and provides the relief of letting laughter and tears mix. It is his own response, representing the "genuine heart of sadness" pointed out by Trungpa as a central quality of one's basic sanity discovered through sitting practice (S 42–46).

Humor and a sane realism pervade the ending of his imagined funeral. Here come the semi-idle, dimly motivated hangers-on at the outer fringes of the world-crowd:

Then Journalists, editors' secretaries, agents. . . . cultured laborers, cultural historians come to witness the historic funeral  
 Super-fans, poetasters, aging Beatniks & Deadheads, autograph hunters . . . intelligent gawkers  
 Everyone knew they were part of "History" except the deceased  
 who never knew exactly what was happening even when I was alive  
 (DF 68–70).

It is a modest ending to a poem and a life, though he is pleased to see that through poetry he carried out the bodhisattva vow. It is an accurate ending as well, as it discards ego and denies fixed knowledge. "Absolutely Eternity changes!" when the mind mixes with appearances in the limitless space of Vajrayana.

"Indestructible limitless space" is one of several ways Trungpa Rinpoche described the feminine principle, which, although not gender-bound, contains qualities associated with women that make it useful in discussing Anne Waldman and her work. The feminine principle is the limitless space—not outer space but inner psychological space—which makes possible everything that happens. It supplies room for limitless ongoing energy, the masculine principle with which it is always in union. Because it is generative, it is called "mother," that which has the potential to bring forth the child, although it is a reality more primal than masculine or feminine. It is also called "mother of all the buddhas," *prajnaparamita*, although this label is somewhat inaccurate. "The only reason it can be referred to as feminine principle," said Trungpa, "is that it has the sense of accommodation and the potentiality of giving birth. Prajnaparamita, transcendental knowledge, is an *expression* of that feminine principle, called 'mother'" (GS 2–3).

That generative space of the cleared luminous mind is the ultimate source of art. For Waldman, who, like Ginsberg, was writing poetry before she encountered buddhadharma, the Vajrayana teachings confirmed and strengthened her established aesthetics. She could join them to the French surrealist poetic-artistic tradition, to contemporary performance art, and to feminist literary-cultural politics as a way of concretizing the feminine principle in symbolic form.

One important manifestation of this expressive synthesis, perhaps a kind of manifesto illustrating the slogan “the personal is political,” is “Fast Speaking Woman,” poem of some 600 lines, first published as a small book by City Lights in 1975 and later collected in *Helping the Dreamer* (1989), where it occupies 23 pages. Waldman’s dramatic readings of this poem launched her distinctive chant performance mode. Her note to “Fast Speaking Woman” says it is “indebted to the Mazatec Indian shamaness Maria Sabina, in Mexico guiding persons in magic mushroom ceremony,” evoking forbidden mystical trance through forbidden though sacred female power, breaking taboos just as Ginsberg had. “Fast Speaking Woman” has as its epigraph Rimbaud’s phrase, “*Je est un autre*,” “I is another,” linking French surrealism’s linguistic dream- and word-play to the second mark of existence, egolessness, the Zen “no-self” and its Mahayana philosophical extension, *shunyata*. Vajrayana obviates the duality between “I” and “other” in the great reality of nonconceptual expressive space. “The essence of feminine principle,” said Trungpa, “is that real world you cannot grasp.”

Ungraspability characterizes “Fast Speaking Woman” with its echoes of André Breton’s “L’Union libre,” a tribute to femininity, and its lightning-charged images that fuse earthy American sense-experience with the potent forces represented in Tibetan *thangkas*, scroll-paintings, and *sadhanas*, ceremonial liturgies intended to wake up the samsarically dulled mind. The poem’s wildly disjunctive associations, which excerpts can barely indicate, paradoxically assert the underlying interconnectedness of all phenomena and the inseparability of body, speech, and mind. That unity appears especially when Waldman herself performs. She is tall, strikingly handsome with classically high cheekbones, slightly hooded eyes, long flying dark hair, for a while painted with a magenta streak. Usually she wears slender black trousers, loose jacket perhaps of brocade, and a long silk scarf, wine red or deep gold or black, draped round her neck or flung over one shoulder.

Her literary devices mirror her personal touch-of-the-East New York breakaway style. In “Fast Speaking Woman” she deploys an extravaganza of alliterative and associative devices drawn from familiar feminine role-activities to create coherence within a highly condensed form. Although each line is suggestive and could be explicated at length, the speed of the performance cuts off intellectual analysis. She repeats the single syntactic structure “I’m a [fill in the blank] woman” just often enough to establish hypnotic incantation, then jolts the listener awake by changing it. Repetition underlines change, emptying out any fixed concept of woman or of personal identity. Yet there is social reference. The blanks are filled with nouns or adjectives or coinages or metaphoric inventions alluding to women’s

characteristics and behaviors, some incorrect because more appropriate to men, some more conventional, for instance house-cleaning:

I'm a shouting woman  
 I'm a speech woman  
 I'm an atmosphere woman  
 I'm an airtight woman . . .  
 I'm an abalone woman  
 I'm the abandoned woman  
 I'm the woman abashed, the gibberish woman . . .  
 the Nubian woman  
 the antediluvian woman  
 the absent woman . . .  
 I'm the woman with the keys  
 I'm the woman with the glue  
  
 I'm a fast speaking woman  
  
 water that cleans  
 flowers that clean  
 water that cleans as I go (*HD* 36–38)

“Cleaning out” symbolizes emptying of concept, the deconstructive *Madyamaka* process in Mahayana, and also the emptying out of language conventions. Woman and water have equal status as signifiers, and the “I” pronoun applies to every woman. The universality of the poem’s overt passion and aggression, transmuted by formal means, constitute its appeal. The reiterated words become *mantra*, sacred phrases repeated to purify situations and protect the mind.

The intensity of “Fast Speaking Woman” and its woman-centered thematics evolve directly into another, specifically Buddhist poem, “Mother’s Curse,” also in *Helping the Dreamer* (188–194). It is based on the *mamo* chants performed every year in Trungpa’s meditation centers in the ten days before the Tibetan New Year’s day. In the Tibetan world-view, *mamos* are invisible beings, “invariably inimical . . . black female demonesses” with a huge appetite for destruction, especially “when exploitation, corruption and poverty go unaddressed” in human society (*IT* 39–40). They externalize the anger, hate and greed in individuals that results in cumulative intractable evil, the seemingly everlasting desire to bring other people down, the suicide bomber’s motivation. Nevertheless, the Vajrayana tradition directs that the spirits can be pacified, at least somewhat, by the proper rituals. Waldman’s poem is such a ritual, designed to invoke powers that work to expose, pacify, and transmute the energy of aggression. Her method is pure

Vajrayana: use poison as medicine. Fight fire with fire. She casts herself in the role of mamo but with a twist that turns the demoness into a wrathful female protector, a *mahakali*, whose ferocious appearance frightens away evil spirits. A parallel manifestation in everyday life is the fierce mother who gives her children a hard time when they do the wrong thing and intervenes forcefully when they're messing up their lives. The mother-protector is not a nice lady but a warrior—warrior is one translation of bodhisattva—who converts aggression into a weapon to protect basic goodness.

That conversion took literal physical and dramatic form when the poet and a dancer, Lisa Kraus, who is also a longtime student of Trungpa, performed “Mother’s Curse” at St. Mark’s Church in New York City in 1989. Deborah Jowett, dance critic for the *Village Voice*, was deeply impressed:

Poet and dancer are so complex and bewitching that you can’t hold the two of them in your eye, ear, mind. Anne Waldman, wearing riding breeches and boots, pulses her foot against the floor, spits out her *Mother’s Curse* with rage and scorn. “These women of more than 1,000 poses . . .” clings for a second—but only for a second to Lisa Kraus, an Indian goddess of destruction with veils, glittery bodice, gray skin, red lips and nails. Her resilient stamping, powerfully sensual gliding steps, sudden enraged clawing take my breath away. I’ve never seen anything like it and I fully expect the columns of the church to collapse.

In short, a Vajrayana thunderbolt. Waldman wrote the poem’s opening lines: “Out of my pen: curses ride down/ Out of sky: appearance/ Out of space: apparel/ a bolt of insight, a cloth, tapestry/ It rolls down/ You rise up to meet it, your eyes alive/ And it rises up within you . . .” She sees her own aggression, doubt, and ambivalence coming back at her as visitations from outside forces but also as her own projections among loosened boundaries between self and other, outside and inside, the personal and the social.

The collaboration itself dissolved boundaries. As Kraus said, she and the poet met together “just a few times” and were “working independently but really empowering each other’s performance.” Kraus had done years of visualization of the mamos and found it “really fun and also easy to physically embody rather than mentally picture them,” to act out in literal space the spiritual force summoned by Waldman’s words. It is the feminine principle actually giving birth through Waldman’s and Kraus’s Vajrayana knowledge and practice that gave them access to their clear minds. They could consciously and without fear enact aggression as vivid energy, pure in itself. The result was an entirely new enrichment of the phenomenal world, a break with samsaric causality that cleared the minds of those witnessing it and changed them from external observers of a performance to

participants in a ritual that, like a Vajrayana sadhana, woke them up and gave them a glimpse of enlightenment.

Such a glimpse of the power of a Buddhist-inspired work of art struck Waldman when she first visited the ancient, long abandoned temple of Borobudur in 1997 while she was working with Naropa University's Study Abroad program in Bali. She felt impelled to return to that "magnificent stupa," built from 760 to 830 C.E. during a period of Indian cultural dominance in Java (*SWCB* xi–xii). She felt it as both a personal quest and a reclamation of the richly endowed Buddhist past and path now lost in modern Muslim Indonesia. The pilgrimage resulted in her recent book, *Structure of the World Compared to a Bubble*, which centers on the narrative sequence of reliefs carved into the million stones that wind upward in an unfolding panorama for the pilgrim to read while ascending to the top. It is, she explains in her prose introduction, addressed to readers assumed to be unfamiliar with Buddhism,

symbolic progression from the "world of illusion" or dream to one of knowledge and enlightenment, "enlightenment": a state of existence which essentially means being "awake" and beyond the grasping of individual ego. . . . Thus Borobudur is essentially an image of the world according to the Buddhism of the Mahayana. (xiii)

On a hidden foot at the base of the stupa, once covered over in an architectural re-design but recently uncovered again, are carved moral tales illustrating cause and effect, in Buddhist terms karma. There are also representations drawn from two sutras or teaching-texts:

The *Lalitavistara* or "The Unfolding of the Play," which is literally about the *performance* of the Buddha in the world, and the *Gandavyuha* or "the Structure of the World Compared to a Bubble," from which this book takes its title. These enable the pilgrim to read the monument pictorially *as a book*. (xiii)

Thus we read Waldman's book as she reads the monument. She places herself as narrator in the condition of the youth Sudhana, the pilgrim-questor in the *Gandavyuha Sutra*, who in traveling through the universe which is also India, meets all kinds of women, men and deities. Their teachings, redolent with symbol and metaphor, guide him from lower to higher levels of realization.

The poem records the performance of a psychological path that loosely parallels the ten circuits the pilgrim must make to read the whole stone-carved narrative at Borobudur. These ten "turnings" mirror the ten stages, or *bhumis* of the bodhisattva path. Like Ginsberg, Waldman took

the formal vow but also pledged herself to carry it out through poetry. Her core intention, like his, is to use all the resources of language to open up the fixed mind, which is the “worst misery.” The vast Vajrayana openness, an extension of the Mahayana wide worldview, gives rise to the multilayered structure of Waldman’s poem, which draws on her Buddhist studies and is framed within her larger experience in Indonesia:

I view this serial poem as a range of lineaments—a walking meditation, a “cultural intervention,” a sutra of mind, “recovery” of a sacred site, as a kind of *doha*, or religiously didactic poem, or as *dbangs* or *mgur*, which are compositions by scholars or priests in the Tibetan tradition, and a modern (or post-modern) “take” on contemporary reality. . . . Invocation and mantra also have a role here. There is always the sense of the larger historical/ cultural/ religious aspects of the literal site. . . .

A key for me is the notion of “syncretic,” both historically, as we sift through the remnants of powerful cultures, and contemporarily in the details of our own particular existence, experiencing the fluid layers and participation of cultures, realities, energies at work *all the time*. [Waldman’s emphasis] (xiv).

Another aspect of these historical and personal interweavings appears structurally in the pictorial representation, a unique typesetter’s invention, of the gongs used in gamelan music. Gamelan—the term refers both to a form of music and to the percussion ensemble that plays it—captivated the poet during her stay on the island of Bali, where it flourishes. In Java, however, it has almost died out. But at Borobudur gamelan instruments of the eighth century appear in the stone reliefs, re-invoking the poet’s sense that her pilgrimage revivifies the Buddhist past, long buried in the jungle, bringing it into the present and, via the poem, sending it on to the future. The poet explains her use of the gong symbols on the printed page:

Gamelan is a music of circular, repeating melodic cycles. Its regenerative structures echo the circumambulatory practices and themes implicit in the carved “sutras” of Borobudur. Thus a presence of gongs provides emphasis, marks time, indicates pause, and invites an element of “performance.” to the text (xv)

“Performance” is in quotation marks to indicate that this book is not a performance to be observed from outside but a meditative ritual into which the reader is absorbed. Although it tracks one woman’s experience, she is Everywoman. As in the medieval morality play of *Everyman*, part of a church ritual, she is ultimately seeking the right thing to do to prepare for death. In Buddhist terms, her poem-title evokes one of the traditional

four reminders of the need for practice recited at the beginning of practice sessions:

The world and its inhabitants are impermanent;  
 this life of beings is like a bubble.  
 Death comes without warning; this body will be a corpse. . . .

The gong symbols are therefore also designed to resemble bubbles, symbol *par excellence* of ephemerality. The printed image places a small circle within a slightly larger one within a yet larger one that is still only an eighth of an inch in diameter. These bubble-circles are not concentric; their rims meet at one point at center bottom. A column of them down the page enhances the text's resemblance to a *sadhana*, the basic Tibetan Buddhist liturgy that enacts and revives the enlightened state of mind.

The invocation poem "Four Noble Truths" imaginatively establishes the start of the path for every human being with the truth "of reality—that is to say, pain and pleasure, the conflicts of life" (GS 2). The book opens with with irregular lineation and a lower case letter, as if in mid-sentence:

startle  
 in-the-sun ruin becomes  
 luminous  
 just so the whole of real life you  
 have no fear. . . .  
 walk in *pilgrimage*  
 plangent fear ho [gong]

Fear and no-fear simultaneous, pain and pleasure mix as shadow and light, stupidity and enlightenment co-emerge. There follows a "Prologue (with 108 gongs)"—there are 108 beads on the *mala*, the mantra-counter that keeps the practitioner honest in her discipline. It is the poet's processional "walking toward the imaginal and literal site," inevitably dragging secret traces of her Christian background behind her, as indicated by her Dantean opening lines: "It was in the middle of my life I read the world as a/ [gong] book—faded gold stone dramas . . ." (4). As gongs are sounded at key points in Vajrayana ceremonials for a wake-up call, each line is preceded by a gong-symbol to imitate that gesture. The lines are sometimes sentences, sometimes nonsyntactic fragments, sometimes groups in Waldman's favored French-surrealist catalog form with a hypnotically repetitive syntactic structure: "I offer . . . offer . . . offer . . . offer" creates a dedication of the book to all beings and all situations. As in "Fast Speaking Woman" and "Mother's Curse," the situation of women looms large

in the poet's mind—the challenges to women, their strengths, and their strange “otherness” are prominent. A gong precedes each line.

Women are not forgotten  
 a verse to honor Queen Sri Kahuluan  
 a verse to benefit the company of women. . . .  
 a verse to check your weapons at the gate. . . . but will you?  
 a verse to conjure the realms of existence  
 a voice to conjure a sense of purpose  
 a verse to conjure lion, jaguar, garuda, dragon  
 a voice that sounds like wailing mothers. . . (6)

The traditional six realms of samsaric existence, sometimes called the six hells, then appear in the next long poem-section, 27 pages long, “Walking Out of Six Styles of Imprisonment.” The subsections reveal in part-prose, part-verse rapid-fire interior monologues the psychological states of mind that the practitioner confronts in the suffering ego-self, which is nevertheless the enlightened self in the Vajrayana view. These realms are depicted iconographically in the style of *thangka* called “The Wheel of Life,” which looks like a giant pie divided in six pie-segments, each with its traditional color, gripped in the monstrous fanged mouth of Yamantaka, Lord of Death. Each realm represents a habitual temperament or habit of mind. While one person may incline more to one habit than to another, in fact everyone falls into all of them at one time or another. The poet opens herself through the recognition of these processes within herself.

The sequence opens with the Hell realm; there she is “caught within lamentable aggression.” Next, in the realm of the *pretas*, the “hungry ghost” realm, she finds that “the more she craves the hungrier she grows.” From that overwhelming unsatisfied greed, she is reduced to the animal realm, “narrowed down to my survival” where speech is mangled and silly but from which realm she reemerges into the human realm of passion: “I want to tell you the human lore story . . . the being realm where we live is beautiful is sincere . . .”

Then comes the realm of the warring gods or jealous gods, the realm of paranoia and seeing enemies everywhere—this section has strong political overtones—and finally the god realm: “what occasions this . . . wanting the phenomenal world to suck me off . . .,” wanting “no conditions but that which services my pleasure,” like a drunken or drug-induced high that bears one on and on, seemingly in endless bliss. Despite this sense of culmination and the fulfillment of all desires, or perhaps because of it, “you get tired of this realm” and “jump into a new place of birth. now light the light (*strike the gong*) and around we go” (8–35) in the constant life cycle of

everything dying and being reborn, not just people, but matter and thought as well.

Seeing the pain of *samsara*'s endless cycle makes the practitioner want to do something about it. Thus begins the bodhisattva's path of cultivating the *paramitas*, "virtues-gone-beyond" or "perfections" through ten stages, the *bhumis*, that progress toward so-called enlightenment as the eleventh—"so-called" because even enlightenment, too, is an empty idea, not really identifiable. Waldman lays these stages out in the traditional teacherly order of Gampopa's *Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, from which Trungpa taught them (JL 152–231). She titles the poems only adjectivally as "first," "second," and so on, naming each in Tibetan, Sanskrit and English. At the eleventh she says:

*kunto-o* means  
 "always luminous" walking back and forth in  
*vajrapamasamadhi*—vajra-like samadhi  
 Knowing and seeing, holding a  
 diamond sword, back and forth walking and knowing  
 and cutting through  
 the two obscurations (SWCB 74)

Mahayana and Vajrayana merge in the image of the "always luminous" mind symbolized by the sword of *prajna*, intelligence, that cuts two ways to destroy fixed ideas of self and other. But this sword is the "diamond" of indestructible, brilliant super-emptiness that both generates and embraces everything that happens. The suggestion is that the always luminous mind has been guide all along to both the transcendent state and the immediate phenomenal world in which the poet is walking and knowing as she circumambulates. In this ritual reenactment of the Buddha's chosen path, she meditates that Buddha, "the enlightened one," is female as well as male. In "Discursive Mind with Gongs at Dusk," she says:

Buddha is the woman  
 I thought  
 Thinking to herself  
 Because she felt she could  
 Emulate a buddha  
 Slowly step right, masculine principle  
 Slowly step left, feminine principle  
 Slowly keep walking beyond gender. . . (76)

In walking beyond gender and the feminine and masculine principles, unified space and activity, she, as Sudhana, meets the Buddha of the

present day in “the appearance of the lion,” and comes to be guided by the Buddha of the future, Maitreya. The visionary prose coda ending the poem expresses her aim in recording the inscriptions at Borobudur and their transformations in her own experience. She italicizes this inner stream-of-consciousness:

*and we see Maitreya walking without stopping of thousands of centuries, and we see Maitreya discoursing on the artistic and scientific ways to benefit all sentient beings . . . and we, the pilgrims, we who have out Good Youth traveler stand in for us on this path in this allegory-dream you could say we inhabit the heart of Sudhana which is akin—this feeling of heart and mind—to the feeling of a person in a dream in a helpful dream where the conditioned things of this world (hard cruel murderous time) disappear and what thou lovest well remains a kind light a sweet light . . . (84)*

“This feeling in heart and mind” and wish for a change from present conditions is like Ginsberg’s wish to push for “gratifying new changes” and for “a difference in the heart”—a desire to alleviate suffering. In the Vajrayana context the bodhisattva path is the choice of a buddha, the already enlightened person. The outcome is complete confidence in one’s ability to dance with reality—things as they are, embracing both confusion and clarity in the basically clear state of mind of Mahamudra. Trungpa explains further in his commentary on the Zen Ox-herding pictures that depict the training of the mind. These symbolic pictures, illustrations of Kakuan’s “10 Bulls” in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, are “so basic as to be considered fundamental to all schools of Buddhism,” said Trungpa. In them “the evolutionary process of taming the bull [mind] is very close to the Vajrayana view of the transmutation of energy” (M 74).

After the fifth picture, “Taming the Bull,” that is, after the bodhisattva accomplishes the paramitas and progresses through the ten bhumis, comes the sixth picture, “Riding the Bull Home”: there is no longer any question of search. The bull (mind) finally obeys the master and becomes creative activity. This is the breakthrough to the state of enlightenment—the Vajra-like Samadhi of the Eleventh Bhumi. With the unfolding of the experience of Mahamudra, the luminosity and color of the mandala become the music which leads the bull home (84).

Poetry is the creative play of language that lights up the inherent purity of the phenomenal world and liberates the mind to see that “pain and pleasure alike have become ornaments/which it is pleasant to wear” (SoM 18). The crazy wisdom of the poetry of Ginsberg and Waldman is a music that keeps people sane on the dancing ground of experience. Sanity is the ultimate “diamond vehicle.”

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PART III

Widening the Circle

*Buddhism and American Writers of Color*

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# 9

## Buddhism, the Chinese Religion, and the Ceremony of Writing

*An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston*

JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE

This interview was conducted on May 30, 2004, at the American Literature Association conference in San Francisco, California. Earll Kingston, Amy Clark, and Jeff Partridge were in attendance.

JOHN WHALEN-BRIDGE: You said no one had ever asked you about Buddhism in your work. So I'd like to ask you about that. Could you tell us about your paths of transmission? How did you learn about Buddhism? Did it come through your family and community, or was it through coffee-shop reading, Alan Watts, and the tattered copies of D.T. Suzuki? Your books also mention Beat writers Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and even Lew Welch as a sort of kind of ghostly monk figure. How does all this come together?

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON: Well, I was born into rituals and ceremonies that my mother did at holidays, strange offerings and altars. The speaking in doorways, speaking in front of ancestors. Visits to cemeteries. Mysterious rituals and words that had no name. She never discussed them, and I didn't know what was going on. Feasts, special foods. We were surrounded by something. As I grew up, I began to think "What was this?" We children were never asked or invited to participate. So, you know, when there are no words to things, then it's not real.

All the Chinese in Stockton, a lot of them anyway, went to the Chinese church, which was the Methodist Church, but my parents didn't go. They would allow us to go because everybody else went, so I attended this Christian Sunday School and understood that as being what religion is. Then there came a day when the people at church asked us to be baptized and gave us a long talk on it, really trying to convert me and my brothers and sisters. So I came home and told my mother, "They want to baptize us," but I didn't know how to say baptize. So I looked it up in the dictionary, the Chinese/English dictionary, and pointed to that word. And she looked at it and she just threw it down. "Of course not." After that, we didn't have to go to church any more.

JWB: How old were you then?

MHK: I guess I was in high school, but I still never thought of what she was doing as our religion. I started to think about it when we had to have dog tags during the Cold War. We all had to wear dog tags in case we died so they could identify our bodies . . .

AMY CLARK: Wearing dog tags! I never heard that before.

MHK: Oh, all children had to wear them. It looked just like the ones that the army people have. And it's with those ball chains around your neck and that big. This was during the Korean War. And we were sure that, you know, somebody was going to drop a bomb or attack us. And we would have a bomb drill. You'd go down in the basement and you'd duck and tuck. We all wore our little dog tags. It's a terrible thing to do to children, because we all knew we were going to die and they're going to find our little bodies and they'll look at this dog tag and they'll . . .

JWB: And figure out which funeral rites to give you. [laughter]

MHK: . . . and what to put on your gravestone. I wish I still had mine. I don't know what happened to it. On the dog tag, there was your blood type and your religion. I asked my parents, "The teacher told us that we had to have a P for Protestant, a C for Catholic. And so what are we?" And she said, "We're Confucius." And I thought, "Oh. That's the C." [Laughter]

But nothing I understood about Confucianism had anything to do with these rituals. It just seemed like an ethical system. My first thinking about Buddhism was reading the Beats; it seemed as if the dharma was imported by these Americans. What I read was very attractive and I felt such connection. It just made sense. But that's my *educated* self. It has no connection with the way I was raised. And then, of course, I read D.T. Suzuki. I read Daoist texts.

There was a trip that we took to China along with Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder. We went to Han Shan and we saw people doing rituals. And I saw that after the Cultural Revolution things were changing. There had

been a temple in our village with “Hong” right over it. This was the Hong family temple. During the Cultural Revolution, they changed the temple to a tractor shed, but when we got there, they were changing it back into a temple. It had an altar that looked just like the altar that we have in Stockton. But it doesn’t look like an altar. It’s a desk, you know, where you do your writing. There were no idols on it. I saw another temple that just had a piece of writing over the altar; it said “Education is Classless.” It was actually a four-word poem: “Education is without class.” And so here’s an elaborate temple to education and to writing.

And so coming back on the plane, after I’d been to my family village, and after we had visited Daoist temples and Buddhist temples, I said to Gary, I asked him, “Is it possible that there is a religion that’s practiced by the peasants, a folk religion that integrates Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism?” And Gary said “No.” He just said no.

I hadn’t thought it out enough to make my case that we had been living with such a religion always. Even though Gary said no, I can see for myself that a billion people have that, whatever it is that my mother practiced.

Meanwhile, my father always says that he’s an atheist and there’s, you know, there’s nothing else. There’s just this life. So I always have their two influences. I think about Hans Christian Anderson, who said, “If your mother and father have completely different life views, then you have a good chance of becoming an interesting person.” And I thought, “Yeah. That’s it. I’m Hans Christian Anderson.”

JWB: Is it fair to say that you have recently “come out of the closet” as a Buddhist? Asian American spirituality is kind of a repressed topic, right? Both in the eye of the white perceiver, but also, I think, in the signal that’s being broadcast from a lot of the Asian American writers. When we first met in Okinawa, we spoke about the volume *Beneath a Single Moon*, an early collection of Buddhist American writers. You weren’t too happy that there wasn’t a single Asian American writer in that volume.

MHK: I thought that was the weirdest thing. There are Buddhist churches all over America, and many people go to them. So many Japanese-Americans, especially. And here we have this American Zen movement. San Francisco Zen Center. There are centers for the rinpoches and lamas, but these are not homes to the old American Buddhists, who were middle-class churchgoers just like everybody else. For years now the American Zen people have been holding conferences. I’d always suggest that we invite the Buddhist church.

There was one conference that was given by one of these normal middle-class Sunday Buddhist churches. And they were going to have a gathering of Buddhist women. And this was a Japanese-American church. They

asked me to come and lead a discussion, but I didn't have the time. So I said, "How about Mayumi Oda?" Because I saw this as a way of bringing the far-out Zen people together with the regular people. It scared the day-lights out of them to have Mayumi Oda. I mean her goddesses and the art and the far-out politics and the psychedelic kind of life—they didn't want to do that. So they ended up with Jean Wakatsuki Houston, who had a more-or-less Christian upbringing. When she was in the relocation camps, it was Catholicism that really made a big impression on her. That bridge between the Zen and the regular Buddhists just hasn't been bridged.

JWB: In Hawai'i the oldest Buddhist community in America gave you a special kind of recognition, right?

MHK: Oh, yeah. The Honpa Hongwanji Mission, which is the biggest Buddhist church in Hawai'i, brought this tradition from Japan, which is to confer the status of "living treasure" on people. They pronounced me a Living Treasure of Hawai'i, and there was this wonderful ceremony. There was chanting in Sanskrit and all the incense going, the monks in their robes. It was just beautiful. When that happened, I thought, "This is the funniest thing." It made me laugh because here they were—they're Buddhists, and they're ordaining me as some kind of something in the Japanese tradition, not Chinese. I wasn't a Buddhist and I wasn't Japanese. *Everybody* is a living treasure. [laughs]

EARLL KINGSTON: It's also a way in which these immigrant Buddhists have joined with the local place—they have recognized a number of Hawai'i artists as "living treasures." They've taken an essentially Japanese tradition or recognizing craftsmen and artists and applied to a new state. The ceremony now helps define what Hawai'i means.

MHK: I see Buddhism as being so free, or at least the vision of Buddhism that Shunryu Suzuki presented—a new American Buddhism—was very free. We could arrive at new places ourselves. And this includes, "I think I'll make up a ceremony right here. I think I will speak out, and I will give myself a title, and I'll give you a title." And I think Suzuki Roshi had this idea that we could do this on our own. Including lay people, too.

JWB: You said you were not a Buddhist when you were found to be a living treasure. Are you a Buddhist now? When did you become a Buddhist?

MHK: I don't know. *Tricycle Magazine* has this two-page spread that says, "Why I am a Buddhist." They've invited me to say why, but I just can't. To say that one is a Buddhist is like saying, "I am a Catholic" or "I am a Protestant" or "I am a Confucian." It all seems so narrow, even Buddhism.

Maybe I can't call myself a Buddhist because I am what my mother and my ancestors are. They were something. And it's so big that you can't even call it a religion. I could as easily say I'm a Daoist. I suppose I could as easily say I'm a Confucian except that some of the laws are so antiquated. I heard

an interesting phrase lately. Somebody talked about “the Chinese religion.” You know? That religion that is Chinese or just *being* Chinese or practicing the Chinese religion. And maybe that’s what it is. You know? It’s the Daoist festivals, the seasons, the rituals, the altars that are both Daoist and—the Chinese religion. You know that linguistic concept of “et cetera”? I am Buddhist, *et cetera*. I am Chinese-American, *et cetera*. I’m an American, *et cetera*. I’m a writer, *et cetera*. [laughs]

JWB: In interviews after *Tripmaster Monkey* you started to say, “The narrator of *Tripmaster Monkey* is the voice of Kwan Yin.” But at that point, you were so coy about it that if you hadn’t said it in the interview, it would have been hard to know.

MHK: I don’t think of Kwan Yin as Buddhist. You know. I mean she is a primitive goddess of the sea. My mother had Kwan Yin all over the place and *never* said Buddhist. The narrator of *Tripmaster Monkey*—I just call her Kwan Yin for a shortcut because I am thinking about the nineteenth century, male, English, omniscient narrator. If the narrator is feminine, then I just call her Kwan Yin because she is Yin, the feminine.

JWB: Sometimes when you read in public you actually do a kind of free-form ritual, right? In a sense you are propagating some Buddhist elements to an audience. Do some people become uncomfortable when religious ceremony comes into the room?

MHK: The first time that I addressed an audience about Avalokiteshvara, I had been working with the veterans for about a year. One evening, we were invited to read at a book store, and so all the veterans and I went to the book store. “This is what we do before a reading,” I told the audience, and then I rang the bell and evoked Avalokiteshvara. It felt entirely comfortable because it was informing them of our practices, the veterans’ practices. This private practice that we had all been doing all of a sudden became a public practice in a book store.

JWB: All of the practices and habits, they have their ancestry; where does your bell-ringing come from?

MHK: I got it from Thich Nhat Hanh. He gives whole lessons on the Bell of Mindfulness. It doesn’t have to be that bell. It could be a car horn honking or the red light or the telephone. Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Don’t rush to the phone when you hear it. Listen to the bell and breathe. Have some *dignity*,” he says. [laughter]

JEFF PARTRIDGE: Do you write now with more confidence in your spirituality? I mean, do you feel that you have more awareness of your spirituality than in the past?

MHK: I still have a lot of trouble finding the words for it. You know? So in that sense, I don’t have confidence. I think it’s very hard to find words

for the invisible, for the nothing. I even doubt that there's anything there. I have doubts about whether it exists for me or for anyone.

JWB: I think we've just converted Gertrude Stein to a Buddhist. "There's no there there anywhere."

How does your most recent book relate to your first book—is *The Fifth Book of Peace* your fifth book of peace, and does that mean *The Woman Warrior*, which you wrote six books ago, was *not* a Book of Peace?

MHK: No, I never thought about it that way, that the other books were not. *The Woman Warrior* was already struggling with the question, what good does war do? I put the Woman Warrior story in the middle of *The Woman Warrior* because I wanted to test that myth. And I say something like, any problems that we have, what good does it do to find a horse and ride off with a sword? I cannot solve any of my problems by using those techniques.

JWB: You probably know the story of Gary Snyder, when he was studying Zen in Kyoto, saying to Joanne Kyger, "Why don't you come to Japan and lose your ego?" and Joanne Kyger responding, "It took me ten years to get one." Your first book is very much about the recovery of identity. You know, the black painting, the silence. Do we sometimes have to recover identity before we let go of it? In this sense, is *The Woman Warrior* a Buddhist book?

MHK: No, I don't think it's a Buddhist book. And I think we always have an identity. I think we're born with identities, but we're not aware of it. That's all. For some people, there comes a time when they're aware of it and then they can tinker with it or try to grow it better, or they can grow up. But it seems to me we always have one, and I don't think I understand that, about letting go of ego. I don't understand that.

In the sense of being show-off and selfish, that kind of ego—I feel a struggle with that, with trying to be less selfish. Artistically, I felt I made a breakthrough when I stopped writing in the first person, which I did for about thirty years. And all of a sudden, I used the third-person pronouns and "you." "You" comes later, too, after the third person. I just became less and less egotistical, less selfish, and more able to consider other people. I think of ego like that, which I don't think is the Buddhist sense of ego. I think in the Buddhist sense, proper selfhood involves the sense that all living beings are connected. I can just feel this ring of connection, or I can also see it as an electric grid in which we're all connected to it and we're all life. And I guess that is what "no self" is. It's just . . . all of us.

JWB: I'd like to ask you a little bit more about *Woman Warrior*. I tell my students all the time—and they wonder if I'm making it up—that the first section is a rewrite of *Scarlet Letter*. Am I making it up?

MHK: Oh no, you're not making that up. I'm so aware of *The Scarlet Letter*. And as I was writing that, I could feel Hester in spirit. And this is what it's about. It's about a small puritanical village in the middle of nowhere. And the whole village is crazy. And there's this sexual energy that it cannot control.

JWB: Now in Hawthorne's case the individual smacks up against her community in terms of the prison. It's a real prison, and she's in the stocks. When you were growing up in Stockton, however, your mother was telling you stories, and you couldn't be sure what was real. Are we sure there was ever an aunt? The question is a little more complicated, since the narrator, who many think of as Maxine Hong Kingston, never once refers to herself as "Maxine." The mother is the narrator's only access to this world.

MHK: Yes. I don't refer to her as Maxine. Now I know that there was an aunt. And the way I found out was that my sister works for the foster care program in San Joaquin County. And it's part of her job to have genealogies of families. She took these genealogy forms and sat my parents down and she said, "I want to make out this genealogy chart so that I can pass this on to my children." And so she starts at the top and then she has the names of the great-great-grandparents and grandparents and then she gets to my father and—"And you had a brother and his name was?" And she puts it down. "And the other brother's name was? The other brother's name? Here's you. And there was a sister?" And my parents both went "Aah!" And there she knew. Right. She knew.

JP: But they didn't give a name.

MHK: My mother says, "Oh, go ahead and tell her." And then my father—yeah, I think he gave a name. But I don't remember what it is right now. So that's how we know. But this is outside the world of the book. There are so many things that I learn after the book is done. When one writes a book is very important, because you just work with the knowledge you have at that moment of creation.

JP: You've said that the *Fifth Book of Peace* addresses some of the failings of *The Woman Warrior*.

MHK: *China Men* is a book about all the omissions from *Woman Warrior*. Each book—every book—contains everything I know. And then when it's published I think, "Oh, my gosh. It's not enough." Then I do the next one.

JWB: Can you elaborate on some of the differences, the things that you are addressing about the *Woman Warrior* in the *Fifth Book of Peace*?

MHK: The first thing that was wrong with *Woman Warrior* is that half the world was not in it. Where are all the men? So I wrote *China Men*, but it was historically different, too, because the men and women were actually living in different parts of the world.

*Woman Warrior* is a book about war. I write about Fa Mu Lan as a swordswoman, and I don't have the emphasis in the right places. I even forgot that she was a weaver. I did not write her story in poetic form, which is the way it was done in China. It's still being done as poetry and not as prose. These are things that I correct in the *Fifth Book of Peace*.

JWB: Okay. In *China Men*, there's a lot of ghost logic. What Derrida calls "Hauntology."

MHK: Oh, I didn't know that.

JWB: Yeah. In *Specters of Marx*, he talks about ghosts and he begins with *Hamlet*. There's Brave Orchid's struggle with a ghost in medical school. What do we mean by ghost? Robert Pirsig addresses the possibilities of ghosts in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* when he talks about the things that won't go away. The American Zen teacher Robert Aiken says we create ghosts when we do not deal with conflicts honestly. I'm wondering if your thinking about ghost logic has changed over the years.

MHK: I am thinking of the ghosts in history and our psychological ghosts. Chinese ghosts exist *in* the language: the white ghost, the white demon, the black demons, the way Chinese talk about the real people who are around us. The everyday world is inhabited by garbage-men ghosts, meter-reader ghosts, and by cops. Real human beings who are not being human at that point. That's the Chinese sense of ghost. I am also telling "ghost stories," just like Stephen King or Edgar Allan Poe. These stories include ghosts that have appeared to me and my friends and family. And it may be that these ghosts, these beings that appear on Halloween and Dia de los Muertos, really exist. So I'm also talking about real ghosts.

JWB: I haven't seen one yet, have you?

MHK: I may have. Yeah. Yeah.

JWB: Gary Snyder has written two poems about Lew Welch, who shows up as a repeated reference in *Tripmaster*. "For/From Lew" and "For Lew Welch in a Snowfall." The poet writes in the first poem that Lew shows up "live as you and me." The poet says he felt "the tingling down my back."

MHK: Because Lew appeared to him?

JWB: Yes. The later poem records a memory rather than a visitation. The poet sits "in the white glow reading a thesis/ About you." It must be Eric Paul Shaffer's doctoral dissertation about Lew Welch, which Snyder co-supervised with Dave Robertson. The poem looks forward, I guess, to when we will all be textual ghosts: "All those years and their moments . . . / Will be one more archive,/ one more shaky text."

MHK: Mm-hmm. I'm a generation gap in myself in that my mother could see the ghosts. She could see them in China, she could see them here. And our son can see them. But I just listen to the two of them.

JWB: So, your thinking about ghost logic has not really changed over the years.

MHK: No, I don't think so. The ghosts stay the same.

JWB: Ghosts are the most isolated beings. What about community, especially the Buddhist ideal, "*sangha*"?

MHK: Well, I feel that to have a full life, everyone needs to have a community. And that could be one's family. At least one Beloved. And then there have to be friends, lifelong friends or friends for life. And I've always thought that, but just recently, meditating with Buddhists, I realized that *sangha* and community are not exactly synonymous. *Sangha* means a community of spiritual practice. The people would have to be having spiritual ceremonies together. Friends that one would socialize with—that is not *sangha*.

Maybe about a dozen years ago I realized this. After the house burned, we planned our new house, and Earll designed a meditation room. We moved in the house about eight years ago, and we started off having friends over. Friends would stay overnight. These were social friends: beloved community. But they're not the *sangha*.

One day one of them stayed overnight, and I asked her, "Would you like to sit in meditation with me?" It was so embarrassing to say that. It was so hard. I had to think about it and maneuver. It was like "proposing" to someone. I had known this woman for forty years, so I asked her to sit with me, and she did. Then I said, "Okay. Now I am turning my community into my *sangha*."

Then another friend came over. This time it was a little easier. I asked her, "Would you want to sit with me?" and she did. Just lately, two new friends came over. One of them was already practicing Japanese tea ceremony, and so she took over the room, and she knew what she was doing and would do this tea ceremony in there. So gradually my community and my *sangha* are becoming one.

JWB: One of the ghosts of American Buddhist writing might be J.D. Salinger, who disappeared forty years ago but continues to haunt our discussions. Do you think he turned his back on the *sangha*?

MHK: I'm not sure whether J.D. Salinger is a Buddhist. It seems from *Nine Stories* and from the stories about the older brother, *Franny and Zooey* and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters!*, as if Salinger got his Buddhism from reading, as if he never had a teacher, a human being that passed on the dharma. He would write about Buddhist sayings, which he put on the wall

and, I guess, he followed Buddhism to the point where it got to that nihilistic and very lonely place, and he never saw how important it was to have the community around you, the community of practice and the loving people who cared for one another and who kept one another's spirits up. I don't think he ever understood that or was given any intimation of it.

Salinger, I think, did have one beautiful moment in one of the stories where the boy, I guess it's Teddy, is drinking milk. All of a sudden he and the milk are connecting; they're one and the same. A great moment of inspiration. That's one of those moments of enlightenment that you can have on your own. It doesn't need a teacher.

JWB: I'd like to ask you a little bit more about *The Fifth Book of Peace* and about the way it grows out of *Tripmaster Monkey* in particular. In part it is a continuation of the Wittman Ah Sing saga. Are you going to continue Wittman's story?

MHK: Probably. Yes.

JWB: In the Wittman Ah Sing saga, there is always a quest for community. From *Tripmaster*, and then through Hawai'i. Your books imagine community, and they even seem to create a sort of guided meditation for readers: there is a visualization of community. Is this a kind of a free-form meditation?

MHK: What is a free-form meditation?

JWB: One could say that the reading experience is a ritual shaped by the author, and it is in that sense a "guided" meditation. Perhaps this ritual structures the book. The Wittman Ah Sing section of *The Fifth Book of Peace* is a fragment, not a full novel: it approaches the beginnings of community, and then the book moves on. Later in the book, in a nonfictional section, you report a debate about the relationship between literary form and life in a workshop with war veterans. You're insisting to these veterans that stories shape lives, especially when you say, "Don't stop at the unhappy ending."

Do you think of *Fifth Book of Peace* as a guided meditation?

MHK: Well, I have thought of writing itself as a meditation because one is sitting alone in a posture of receptivity with instruments of reception right there in front of you. You sit in such a posture that the muses can find you and inspire you. And then I receive something, which it's up to me to put into form.

In *The Fifth Book of Peace* my overall philosophy was that certain people can do certain things at a young age. Wittman Ah Sing and Tanya, Earll and I—we were in Hawai'i, and we helped set up that sanctuary at Church of the Crossroads. That sanctuary was busted, and then we took the AWOL soldiers home. The soldiers turned themselves in, and then the Vietnam

War went on and on. Such a failure. We didn't do enough. We weren't able to stop the war. We weren't able to help these young men enough. There's a lot of regret, and there's nothing you can do about it. That was thirty years ago now. Nothing you can do. It's too late.

Then there's another part of life that comes, and you have another opportunity. I think: and now I will set up another sanctuary. This time there will be writing workshops for veterans. And mostly Vietnam veterans. And these workshops are filled with different people. They are veterans and they are now twenty years older. They're different people. So now we have another chance. We'll try it again. And this time we'll go further on the journey. And then we will find a happy ending now.

This later, different story takes a different form. The story in Hawai'i was a younger story. It's fiction because I can't remember all the details. I've forgotten many names. Some people didn't want their real names told because they were felons on the run. They were giving fake names. So the story must be fictional.

Okay, so now I try to end the story in the real world, making things right with real people. And so I found this new form in which failures can be redressed, and then we arrive at a happy ending.

JWB: Speaking of more work and more years, maybe we can close by just asking you, if you're comfortable talking about future books. Where is Wittman Ah Sing going next?

MHK: Well, right now what I have are lots of beautiful blank notebooks, and when I have a thought or an idea or a word or an image, I find a notebook and I put it in. There are eight different categories, one for each notebook. None of them has cohered into a story or poem yet. But I have something about Wittman, who at sixty years old, has heard of the Indian Hindu idea that when a man reaches sixty he can leave his wife. And so at last he can have his big fantasy. He can leave Tanya and he can do it right, because he's decided that he's going to follow Hinduism now. According to this idea, when you're sixty you could either have a new marriage ceremony or you can go on your way. You can follow your guru, your vision. And so I'm going to have him—well, he's got to work this out with Tanya. Because she's just a little bit younger than he is, so how come she doesn't get to decide? You know? Maybe she gets to leave him. So that—that's a seed of what's going to happen.

JWB: Is everything okay with you and Earl?

MHK: You know what happened? He is 65 and I am 63, and so we passed that 60 thing. Without a ceremony.

JWB: Don't you think Tanya's going to kick Wittman's ass?

MHK: Yeah. [Laughter]

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# 10

## A Bridge between Two Worlds

*Crossing to America in Monkey Bridge*

HANH NGUYEN AND R. C. LUTZ

MAKING PEACE

*Sick*

*also i must be  
to go on making peace  
with passion  
while the world wars on  
dispassionately*

Trinh T. Minh-ha (257)

How does the legacy of the Vietnam War affect a young Vietnamese woman, a practicing Buddhist, who comes to America after the fall of Saigon? Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997) forcefully confronts such a problem. Narrated from the point-of-view of a teenage girl named Mai, *Monkey Bridge* tells the story of her mother Thanh and her struggle to resolve family and generational issues that are the results of the bitter war in Vietnam. In America Thanh continues to rely on Buddhism, which is alien to her new host country, even as she tries to bring her personal struggles to a close and guide her daughter into adulthood. For Thanh Buddhism is a continuing influence, and Cao has utilized Buddhist belief to culturally and historically ground Thanh. This essay will explore her actions within the Buddhist context

of karma, particularly the three forms of *prarabdha*, *sanchita*, and *kriyamana* karma. While Thanh herself fails to cross the metaphorical “monkey bridge” into her new world, her life story is revealed to her daughter Mai in an act that could be imagined as a karmic transmission from mother to daughter, even though the adolescent Mai overtly rejects her mother’s beliefs.

#### FROM VIETNAM TO AMERICA: THANH AND THE QUESTION OF ENGAGEMENT OR WITHDRAWAL

With its focus on personal development and spiritual enlightenment and its unusual refusal of exclusivity, Buddhism enables a more syncretistic spiritual lifestyle than other world religions. Buddhism allows its adherents to integrate other religious teachings as long as they don’t flagrantly conflict with the primary guidelines known as the Eight Fold Path. At its core, Buddhism holds that each person is responsible for the fate of his or her “soul.” (Buddhism denies an immortal soul, but popular Buddhism often refers to past- and future-life continuities that seem to posit something like a soul.) Karma, or the law of cause and effect, holds that each good or bad act conditions a life and determines the manner of reincarnation. The accumulation of negative karma through morally bad actions can be diminished but not escaped. For many Vietnamese, Buddhism is an exceptionally strict religion, as the believer has to be careful not to create negative karma that cannot be erased in this present life.

These strictures of karma and Buddhism’s emphasis on profound moral responsibility trouble Thanh. Through her, Cao thematizes the challenges faced by an exiled immigrant and postcolonial subject who is also a Buddhist. Thanh is a Vietnamese mother who is trying to transfer her organically grown Buddhist beliefs to America, which has no deep historical or cultural ties to that religion. Living in diaspora reveals to Mai the significant gaps between Buddhism, Buddhist practices, and Buddhist beliefs in the East, as do her new living circumstances and status as a refugee in America. In the late 1970s in which the novel is set, Buddhism is often viewed as an exotic or an esoteric religion. As such, it is in danger of being Orientalized, marginalized, or devalorized. To her new American neighbors, Thanh’s religion represents one of the least understood elements of her historical and cultural inheritance. Coming to America forces Thanh and Mai to attempt to adapt to the mainstream American culture that wishes to forget the pain of its war in Southeast Asia, though most Americans show neither understanding nor interest in the religion that has shaped Thanh’s selfhood in the East.

Confronted with such an American attitude, Thanh suffers withdrawal and disengagement and is forced into a bifurcated existence. Unlike Mai, Thanh immediately chooses withdrawal from rather than engagement with

the new host culture, preferring internal exile to assimilation. In the face of continuing adversity, Thanh comes to rely fundamentally on her Buddhist beliefs in karma. Rather than trying to live according to the terms of a new society that is at best benignly indifferent to her belief, Thanh chooses to retreat deeper into her faith, whose practices guide her life even more strongly.

Her experience is especially problematic regarding karma. Karma applies to the entire cycle of cause and effect, and it conditions the process of incarnation: karma, at such transitional moments, can be thought of as the sum effect of an individual's actions during his or her life cycle, affecting this person's future lives decisively and irrevocably. Only a fully enlightened Buddha or Bodhisattva goes beyond this cycle, producing no karma and achieving the desired goal of ending the cycle of birth and rebirth. For all others, good or bad karma results from the effects of a person's deeds and can determine the present and future experiences of each person. In each incarnation, the individual is responsible for the next karmic consequences for his or her next life (or, more precisely, incarnation into a new life that does not necessarily have to be in human form at all), and for others associated with the individual. The latter point—that one's individual karma can also affect the lives of others—is a special one in Vietnamese Buddhist practice and belief, and this conviction complicates Thanh's life with Mai.

Partly because of her faith in karmic operations, Thanh becomes a cathartic, "invisible" Other, even to her daughter Mai. Thanh has great difficulty remaining a sane Vietnamese. Ngoc H. Buui and Joseph Stimpfl comment on the psychological erosions created by the cultural adaptation that Thanh must undergo: "Ethnic identity has been cited as playing a particularly salient role in such psychological processes as cultural adaptation and acculturation . . . generational conflicts . . . and psychological adjustment and stress of refugees . . ." (119). For Thanh, Buddhism becomes the reconstituted refuge of an exiled self, as she is still living with the powerful yet disappearing images of her life and her family. To Mai, Thanh is in danger of becoming the Orientalized stereotype whose beliefs have been devalorized. In everyday interactions with the outside world, Mai decides to suppress her mother's voice through a deliberate effort to mistranslate her mother's speech to Americans, and thus she refuses to empathize with Thanh's religious woes. Instead, Mai revises her mother's words into culturally sanitized messages that conform to hegemonic expectations of everyday Western/American discourse, expectations that she has been able to introject more easily than has Thanh. Thanh's true words are revealed only to Mai herself and the reader.

Mai's voice serves to fuse memories of her early life and that of her living and deceased family members with her own current observations of American culture, and in this way the reader juxtaposes Mai's Americanized insights with those of her mother. Thanh's karmic beliefs, as revealed by Mai, are suffused with the legends and myths of Vietnam, even as these beliefs are threatened by her life in permanent exile. The interplay between mother and daughter and of past memories and present challenges is counterbalanced by the interplay of the fate of Vietnam and the United States—a parallel in accordance with Thanh's belief in the consequences of actions followed by reactions, or karma. In a test of psychological survival and cultural adaptation, Thanh attempts to maintain her belief in karma in the face of mainstream American culture. This central issue of *Monkey Bridge*, Michelle Janette writes, "speaks directly to the issues of authenticity, representativeness, and ownership of experience" (74).

The novel recounts Thanh's troubled struggle to come to terms with the suffering in her life and the suffering of her nation. Thanh's actions are driven by a deep, popularized understanding of three key Buddhist notions of karma as understood in Vietnam. First, *prarabdha* karma is built throughout the past lives of the individual soul and especially by the soul's ancestors and family; the consequences of *prarabdha* karma have to be lived out and resolved in the current life. In Vietnamese Buddhist practice, there is a strong emphasis on *prarabdha* karma, as this form of karma contains a clear link to pre-Buddhist ancestor worship. Second, *sanchita* karma represents past actions and issues still unresolved at rebirth; like the *prarabdha* concept of karma, *sanchita* karma is influenced by both the previous incarnations and one's ancestors. The third concept of karma is *kriyamana* karma, the karma that a one creates in one's current incarnation and that will bear negative or positive consequences in the future.

PRARABDHA KARMA:  
THANH'S NIGHTMARE OF THE PAST

Mai confides to the reader that her mother and her Vietnamese neighbors of her mother's generation in many ways "continued to live in a geography of thoughts defined by the map of a country that no longer existed in terms I could understand. Once upon a time, when we were together in Vietnam, my mother, of course, had been utterly understandable" (66). These words echo what is at the heart of *Monkey Bridge*: the intensely strained and increasingly distant relationship between Mai and Thanh.

This centrifugal effect is due to the persistence of Thanh's traditional beliefs in her Vietnamese country and culture, beliefs that are fortified by her outspoken belief in karma, contrasted with her silence and shame about her family history. Unlike her mother, young Mai adapts well to American culture, and she develops an American, adolescent sense of independence. Thanh's constant clinging to the past thereby comes into conflict with Mai's adaptation to American culture. Her mother's adamant refusal to be assimilated by American society—or even to attempt to communicate with Americans on their own terms—forces Mai to handle her mother through complicated and sometimes deceptive maneuvers with some agility, similar to the agility required to cross actual monkey bridges in Vietnam. These narrow and precarious Vietnamese bridges, the text's central symbol, are constructed of long, sturdy, bamboo trunks tied together; they span small rivers or other deep bodies of water in the Vietnamese countryside and deltas. Crossing these bridges takes skill and confidence, and Mai successfully crosses these symbolic bridges as she adapts to the American mainstream. The novel's tension arises from Thanh's effort to cross *with* her daughter; yet she bears the full burden of her Buddhist-shaped consciousness and her painful family memories.

The novel opens with Thanh in the hospital in Virginia due to a stroke that leaves Mai's "once . . . beautiful" mother now partially paralyzed with "singed and puckered flesh" (3). Whereas her new paralysis is the result of her stroke, the damage to her skin is a consequence of her life in Vietnam. (The American reader may be reminded of the famous photo of Kim Phuc, the girl with a napalm-burned back running naked toward the camera on the cover of *Time* magazine in the summer of 1972, who became one of the icons of the Vietnam War in America.<sup>1</sup>) Thanh's injuries are initially a mystery to Mai, who wonders if her mother's version of a kitchen accident in Vietnam may be concealing a war-related event. The hospital staff and Mai are confident that physical recovery after Thanh's stroke may be achieved through physical therapy, yet for Thanh, "it was not muscular but karmic movements and the collapse of Heaven that frightened [Thanh]" (8). Thanh reacts to her condition by relying on her mantras more than on her physical therapy, and so Mai feels compelled to mediate between Thanh and her American therapist. Mai has successfully crossed a metaphoric monkey bridge at the hospital, while Thanh remains on the further shore.

Thanh's belief in the effectiveness of her mantra recitation (that is, the formulaic repetition of Buddhist phrases) provides her with a profound spiritual comfort that Mai cannot entirely understand. Through

examining Thanh's religious beliefs, Mai is forced to examine the nature of her mother's depression. Thanh feels the political and tragic nature of war, the loss of the ancestral homeland, and the challenges of new life in America. As Sheng-mei Ma explains, "The irreconcilably split personality associated with past glory and present shabbiness of immigrant mothers surfaces" (Ma 41). Thanh's silence about the war and her family's past increases Mai's wish to understand her. But in order to understand her mother, Mai thinks she has to find out only about her family's Vietnamese past and history. Mai, like a young detective, hopes to decode Thanh's ravaged maternal body—and metaphorically Vietnam as the ravaged maternal body—as well as the traditional customs and beliefs of the ancestral land, family secrets, and shame. By reading her mother's diary, Mai comes to grips with Thanh's own tragic, autobiographical narrative. The diary, reveals Thanh's Buddhist beliefs, especially her belief in karma. On this level, through the medium of the diary, Vietnamese Buddhist beliefs cross the monkey bridge into American culture.

In dealing with karmic consequences, Cao does not offer a comforting, successful immigrant story or testament, as does her compatriot Le Ly Hayslip.<sup>2</sup> Hayslip, according to Renny Christopher, conforms to the "idea of 'transnational cultural fusion'" in which "Vietnamese refugee writers attempt to work," a way of writing that "suggests one model of cultural pluralism. In that model, the immigrant is transformed by America and at the same time transforms America" (109). In contrast, *Monkey Bridge* is ironic. Cao's ironic technique is exemplary of Asian immigrant narratives, as Janette explains:

By teaching us the very codes that allow us to decipher ironicalisions, gaps, and contractions throughout the novel, Cao provides us grounds for entering the narrative dialogically, neither relying on prior practice experience nor assuming universal similarity. (73–74)

Thanh lives like a ghost, ostensibly free but forced to call Virginia home. Mai reports that women like her mother go through life like "[i]nsomniacs [who] cultivate clandestine selves . . . mothers unload their burdens and hoard intricate sheddings . . . My mother found the dark reassuring. She enjoyed this, the sunset, the vacant streets, dusk seeping through the blinds . . . the expanse of sadness that was peculiarly hers" (45). According to Buddhist teachings on karma, Thanh lives in the constant state of *prarabdha* karma, which involves the causal results of whatever good or bad actions were committed in one's own past by one's previous incarnation and by one's ancestors. All of these must be atoned for in this life.

So Thanh must pay for those karmic actions or consequences that were committed in the past by her ancestors or her erstwhile lives. She herself firmly believes that it is her *prarabdha* karma that has caused her present suffering. She accepts this as a fact, regardless of the circumstances of her present life. This does not mean, as some Westerners may assume, that she believes she deserves this fate in any moral sense. Rather, this is her fate, and for a Vietnamese Buddhist like Thanh, *prarabdha* karma has shaped the fate of her current incarnation quite independently of her own historical merit or demerit.

Thanh writes her family history at night, purposely leaving her writing where her daughter can find and read it. She has crossed the monkey bridge into a new land only to suffer nearly unbearable longing for her ancestral past. She lacks optimism about or acceptance of her present life; instead, Thanh's only comfort is to hope that Mai will read her account of her life in Vietnam. As Stuart Hall writes, "the past continues to speak to us. But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual past. . . . It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (395). Despite her religious beliefs, Thanh seems to contradict the Buddhist precept to "let go." As David Scott explains, "for the Mahayana schools, the Buddha's 'Middle Way' . . . was indeed one of neither rejecting nor clinging. Much of the Mahayana's thrust can be seen as various moves to break down or to not become entrapped by dualistic thinking" (152). As a Buddhist, Thanh does not successfully extinguish the negative karma created in her past and cannot let go of her intense attachment to the past, so she is forced to suffer through the pains of her present state, a process called *prarabdha* karma. She experiences extreme attachment to the past and rejects the new way of life in America with no moderation in her desire. She yearns for her lost country and attempts to live as if she were in Vietnam, and she makes no effort to effect a mental transition to a different way of life. She resists crossing the bridge. As Mai observes, "Our apartment was so different. My mother wanted it maintained as a mere way station, rootlessly sparse since the day of our arrival. She had no claim to American space, no desire to stake her future in this land" (91).

Thanh lives in America with a minimal attachment but with an intense emotional commitment to Vietnam. From Vietnam, she carried over as well physical scars marring her face, mentioned at the novel's outset. She subconsciously relishes her physical scars, which she claims were caused by a kitchen fire accident in Vietnam, because she secretly sees her injuries as indicative of her physical ability to bear pain and suffer ravages on her body in order to avoid passing on the karmic consequences of her shameful family secrets to her own daughter. While Thanh thinks that in this way

she can atone for past ancestral sins, family shame, and other factors that cause *prarabdha* karmic misery in her present life, she fails to control her own emotional and mental trauma and does not understand her inability to deal with the past.

As Sallie B. King has argued in her discussion of Buddhist beliefs, it is possible for one “who accepts all [her suffering] and willingly accepts the negative karma that is due” to become free in the next life “of all negative karmic consequence” (141). Instead of accepting past sins in this life, Thanh is incapacitated in her present situation and is overwhelmed by her nostalgia, and she is burdened because she conceals the past her from daughter. In her mental breakdown, Thanh fails to live in true accordance with Mahayana principles by which, as Stephanie Kaza writes,

the liberated person has learned to recognize, accept, and bear with suffering, her own and others. This means s/he is more capable of functioning effectively, with dignity and equanimity, under restrictions or adverse circumstances. Thus the real person is more available to help others as needed, to be present with loss, to reflect the full measure of life energy arising in any situation. (47)

Instead of gracefully accepting her pain as a result of karmic consequences created by her past and by the actions of her ancestors, Thanh longs for her earlier self in a now lost Vietnam. Nevertheless, the novel does look at Thanh’s failings and her stumbling efforts on the Buddhist path with deep sympathy.

#### SANCHITA KARMA: ANCESTRAL SINS, SECRETS, AND SHAME

As a maturing teenager developing her own sense of self in a new culture, Mai is very much in tune with American attitudes regarding individuality, freedom, and success. However, her mother indirectly yet constantly reminds her of traditional Vietnamese thinking and expectations. Thanh is mindful that all actions lead to effects for the next generation and that her present life is shaped by the past. As she cannot let go of her pain, partly because of her longings for the past, Thanh is conscious of her suffering. This becomes wearisome to Mai, yet she tries to alleviate her mother’s pain. Mai thinks that Thanh’s calling out for Mai’s paternal grandfather Baba Quan in her fitful sleep is due to their separation: when they failed to meet at the airport during the final days of the Vietnam War. She believes that this missed meeting is putting her mother in a state of depression.

According to Thanh, her daughter is so Americanized that she thinks the truth may be found if only one looks methodically. Mai thinks, in turn, that her mother must feel a great sense of loss and guilt for abandoning Baba Quan in Vietnam in his old age, which would be a Confucian “sin” due to lack of filial piety. (Throughout Vietnamese history, Confucianism has been closely intertwined with Vietnamese Buddhist beliefs.) Thanh has fostered Mai’s mistaken belief that Baba Quan was very much tied to his ancestral land as a Confucian traditionalist, a Vietnamese patriot, and a simple feudal farmer, but Thanh’s diary reveals the truth:

*How could I have told you that Baba Quan, the man I call Father, is a Vietcong from whom I am still trying to escape? How could I have revealed his true identity . . . And so how could you have known that there had been no rendezvous by a fenced-in park, no car that would have scooped him up to deliver us to an American plane? While you imagined you grandfather as a phantom figure lingering in the shadows of a black statue, waiting to escape from a country on the verge of collapse, he was in fact part of a conquering army whose tanks blasted through the barricades and stormed down Saigon’s boulevards with predatory fury on April 30, 1975. (227–228)*

In reading Thanh’s diary, Mai realizes that her grandfather was really an alcoholic, full of abuse and revenge. Baba Quan prostituted his own wife to their feudal landlord because they could not make payments on their leased land due to droughts and poor harvest, and the result of this prostitution was Thanh’s birth. Later, when Baba Quan became a Communist, he came back to his village and killed the landlord. (Indeed, the Viet Minh initially supported a violent style of forcible land reform with extrajudicial killings, physical abuse, and property theft. In the North, it was Ho Chi Minh himself who stopped such excesses as they seriously threatened to undermine Communist popularity.)

Until she discovers the truth, Mai is misled by her own mother to believe a sanitized version of her family history. As Claire Stocks argues, “In *Monkey Bridge*, relocation to the U.S. gives the refugees the opportunity to reinvent themselves in the present, but it also allows them to rewrite history” (84). However, Thanh creates a false history not simply to protect Mai’s innocence; Thanh also writes with a religious purpose. Thanh believes that her revision of history will lessen the burden of *sanchita* karma, which is the result of all the past karmic actions and consequences yet to be resolved. Because of bad actions her ancestors performed, Thanh must suffer. A common, cautionary Vietnamese proverb holds, “*Doi cha an man, doi con khat nuoc*”—roughly meaning, “Eating salt in the father’s generation leaves the child thirsty in the next generation.” This sentiment aptly applies to Thanh’s situation because of Baba Quan’s crimes, even though he turns

out not to be Thanh's biological father. But as the legal husband of Thanh's mother, Baba Quan was guilty of being an alcoholic, a pimp, and a murderer who killed the landlord, Thanh's biological father. Thanh's responsibility for Baba Quan, in the words of Jay L. Garfield, is what "Buddhist philosophy refers to as . . . dependent co-origination. This term denotes the nexus between phenomena in virtue which events depend on other events, composites depend on their parts, and so forth" (221). The legal union of husband and wife is sufficient to allow for dependent co-origination in Thanh's case. Even though there is no blood relationship between her and Baba Quan, her mother's marital bond ties Thanh to him.

In this way Cao dramatizes how Buddhism assimilated elements of the ancestor worship preceding its arrival in Southeast and East Asia. The line of reincarnation does not have to be limited to familial relationships, since a truly despicable soul may be reborn as a lowly animal, for example. However, one can combine the Buddhist concept of reincarnation and its concomitant belief in the effect of karma on the outcome of each reincarnation with earlier, indigenous religious belief in the power of ancestors to shape the present. This syncretistic process is exemplified in Thanh's faith. Again, we see the relative ease with which Buddhism has incorporated elements of other belief systems—such as ancestor worship and Confucianism. This certainly allowed for the widespread development of Buddhism among the Vietnamese, a people with a strong attachment to their oldest beliefs. Hence, it is no surprise to see how strongly Thanh holds onto her own belief in the instance of Baba Quan.

In America, Thanh and Mai are very far from the war-torn and ancestral Vietnam. Yet Thanh believes that the karmic sins of Baba Quan will follow them until all debts are paid. As Stocks writes, "Generational division and cultural distance offer Thanh some comfort that her family karma may finally be escaped, but despite her mother's protective silence, Mai acts as a repository for traumatic memories" (85). Though Thanh says little about her family's past, she reveals all in her diary. This method may be much more powerful than just spoken words because the diary is a clear, written document that details the hidden family history, and Mai reads it attentively. Thanh's own writing serves as a personal narrative, an illumination of her soul, even though in some forms of Buddhism, autobiography should be discouraged. As Peter D. Hershock, a theorist of autobiographical writing, claims, the narrating self is

thus made a function of the storytelling ego who identifies him- or herself as the center through a juxtaposition or interaction with others who remain steadfastly positioned at one or another level of circumference.

Contrary to such persuasions, a fully Buddhist articulation of who we are as persons entails nothing short of removing the very presumption of ontological difference, of the distinction of self and other—in short, of relinquishing all of the horizons by means of which we identify our own selves and those of others. (691–692)

Indeed, Thanh's faith and her actions also exemplify the occasionally considerable difference between popular beliefs of lay Buddhists in Vietnam and strict Buddhist theology. Just as Thanh is unable to let go of her love for her Vietnam, so she is unwilling to let her sense of self and her personal history and family life dissolve into nothingness. Those who practice Buddhism "invisibly" are less likely to consider failure to live up to its abstract doctrines as a spiritual shortcoming. When Buddhism is lived and mixed in with ancestral religion, Confucian ethics, and many folk beliefs and traditions, Buddhism becomes less a theoretical exercise than an everyday, spiritual guidance system moving people like Thanh.

A part of Thanh's inherited *sanchita* karma is the lost body of her own mother. Awakened from a six-month coma after a napalm attack in her village in Vietnam (which, Mai learns, caused her mother's disfigurement), Thanh knows she can never recover her mother's unburied body. Ignoring all warnings, Thanh only entered the "free fire zone" where she was injured because she wanted to recover her mother's body. Now that her mother's body has been incinerated by napalm, Thanh worries about her mother's karmic fate. Thanh feels guilty for not alleviating her mother's own bad karma through a proper burial with its attendant rituals, intended to assuage the troubles of the soul that has left its body. According to Vietnamese folk belief, a soul not properly buried is left wandering, rootless. Again, pre-Buddhist Vietnamese beliefs are accommodated within a Vietnamese Buddhist framework. Even though, in much of the Buddhist tradition, the body does not matter, for the common Vietnamese Buddhist proper burial is of vital spiritual importance.

Thanh cannot relinquish her sense of responsibility for her late mother. She will never be able to secure a permanent resting place for her mother because she cannot recover the body, so she feels helpless to alleviate the suffering of her mother who, Thanh believes, wanders aimlessly in the spirit world. As David Chappell writes, such a failure to lessen the suffering of others, especially of a close family member like a mother, is deeply troubling to a Buddhist. As Chappell notes, in Mahayana Buddhism "the commitment to the concrete relief of the suffering of others takes center stage, shouldering aside the experience of emptiness. . . . [C]ompassion is the beginning and end of wisdom" (364). For a Vietnamese

Buddhist, then, the inability to provide final spiritual succor to a parent is a torment.

As Mai reads her mother's diary about icons of the Vietnam War, traditional Vietnamese culture, and Vietnam's history and mythological conventions, she must try to attend to it as a vehicle for Thanh's mediation between personal survival, family integrity and honor, and the reality of hideous life events. The past of Mai's Vietnam is revealed to her through this diary, presented as an alternative to American mass media. Beset by visual images of the war that she sees on American television, Mai does not buy into a glorification of the war as some mainstream Americans seem to. Rather, these televised images reinforce for her the fact that she must now engage seriously in a discursive moment, using her knowledge from reading the diary to bring some form of harmony to herself and her mother.

Her mother's demons are closely tied to how Thanh views Vietnam's national history. To Thanh, history has to do greatly with *sanchita* karma, but on a much more national scale than Mai's more familial understanding. The notion of harmony that Thanh desires is a core concept of Mahayana Buddhism, as discussed by Michio Shinozaki:

[H]armony can be categorized in terms of four different levels: first, on a personal level, harmony as the ideal state of mind reached through self-cultivation; second, social reality as a relational and an institutional harmony; third, global reality as an international and an institutional harmony; fourth, cosmic harmony between humans and nature. (16)

Within Shinozaki's framework, Thanh strives for harmony on a personal level by trying to atone for the sins of Baba Quan through her silent suffering in America. On a social level, she aligns herself with other Vietnamese immigrant women in Virginia, who try to re-create a functioning social system built on mutual support that nevertheless fails to save her. On an international level, Thanh unquestioningly accepts her exile in America as a refugee from her own land. She has foregone the mountains and rivers of Vietnam in an effort to extirpate the sins of Baba Quan and to create a more hospitable environment for the next generation, her daughter Mai. Finally, on a cosmic level, Thanh appears to believe that her present life of suffering and silent atonement represents a small step toward increasing universal harmony through living an exemplary life.

#### KRIYAMANA KARMA: THE BOND THAT TIES

The maternal tie between mother and daughter, according to Thanh, is that "*genetics and karma, they're as intertwined as two strands of thread from*

*the same tapestry*" (169–170). She further laments that "I was a mother in love with my child, and the urge to hang on to her forever was a hunger no one but a mother could understand" (55). As discussed previously, Thanh combines the bloodline of her family with the Buddhist principle of reincarnation. In popular Vietnamese Buddhist practice, the quality and degree of suffering of a new life is primarily determined by the past actions not only of the reincarnated being, but also by the moral activity of his or her ancestors. With her strong belief in a continuous bloodline affecting the fate of the next generation and of generations to come, Thanh's anxiety about Mai, whom she fears she is losing, becomes understandable. Thanh's despair is caused by her increasing estrangement from Mai because of their fractured life in America. Thanh lives in gloom while Mai lives in hope.

Mai manages to live successfully in the duality of past and present even as she is still affected by her youth in Vietnam. She has aspirations of college and a career, yet she is never far from the past because of the reminder provided by her mother's presence. She and Thanh are an immigrant family grappling with the war-torn past of their home country. In a larger context, Thanh and Mai's narrative represents one small example of the many convoluted stories concerning the Vietnam War. To make matters worse, the consequences of these events include the emotional and cultural dislocation of a large number of people from their homeland. As Arif Dirlik writes, "The grounding of Asian America in U.S. history underlined the commonality of the Asian American experience with the experience of other oppressed groups in American society while it problematized the relationship of Asian Americans to their distant origins in Asia" (6). To bear this loss with Buddhist equanimity proves to be too much for Thanh.

Thanh is determined to shield Mai from the bad karma of their family's shameful history. For this endeavor, she relies on folk religious traditions to ease her spiritual burden and fulfill her important task. Thanh takes a great leap of faith as a protector of her daughter from karmic harm by relying on the positive effect of her "*Buddha-shaped*" ears, meaning she has elongated earlobes like that of the Buddha in many Vietnamese iconic representations (51). She feels pride in her ears, expressed in her "usual convoluted language about karma" as "that word alone . . . had become her very own singular mantra" (10). Thanh professes in her writing that "*through my ears I would have the power not only to heal but also to repair generation after generation of past wrongs by healing the faces of karma itself. . . . My ears continued to grow longer and longer every day, until one day they looked like Siddhartha Gautama's ears on the day he attained enlightenment*" (52). With this blessed physical trait, Thanh tries to make up for the negative karma both from her family and her own past history.

*Kriyamana* karma is created by karmic actions that an individual performs in his or her present life that will bear good or bad fruit in the future, or even in the next life cycle. Thanh is trying to be a good mother by revealing her entire life history in her diary so that Mai may finally heed her words. She wants Mai to know all about Mai's own karmic life, which for Thanh is connected to herself and their ancestors. Thanh insists that the fate of each individual is based on *kriyamana* karma, that what one does in this life will bear consequences in the future for one's next life and those associated in one's family line. She fears for transgenerational karmic retribution, lamenting:

*No one can escape the laws of karma. Nor can a country divest itself of the karmic consequences of its own action. . . . For every action there is a reaction, for every deed of destruction there is a consequence. It's as exact and implacable as the laws of physics. . . . As I sit here in the middle of the night and look at us now, a people and a country utterly abandoned, utterly destroyed, it is not bewildered tears I weep, not at all. We all knew . . . an omen of things to come, of karma wrought and karma returned. Karma is based less on rights and entitlements than on moral duty and obligation, less on celebration of victories than on repentance and atonement. (55–56)*

Thanh fears transgenerational karma as punishment for Mai, and as a result she chooses to write to Mai in her diary to amplify her warning. Further, she is insistent that Mai should wear a Buddha charm around her neck, which is to shield Mai from all karmic pollution. Thanh's belief in the necessity of the charm is one visible expression of her ingrained fear resulting from her Buddhist beliefs in the consequences of karma. Again, one can see a folkloristic fudging of the doctrinal issue, as no charms can really influence karma in the widely accepted doctrinal statements of Buddhism. Yet living Buddhism diverges from these doctrines.

Because of the past sins of her ancestors, particularly Baba Quan's, Thanh tries to create her own positive *kriyamana* karma, believing she must create much positive karma in order to benefit her daughter later. Similarly, on an international level, Mai and Thanh feel that Vietnam itself had to atone for the sins of conquering the Southeast Asian kingdom of Champa in the Middle Ages (now Central and South Vietnam) and for the later injustices of the Southern and Northern regimes during the Vietnam War. The present suffering of their country, like their own suffering, can be traced to the bad karma created by past and present national leaders and to a populace following their exhortations and example.

CROSSING THE MONKEY BRIDGE: A LEGACY

Millions of Vietnamese people, even those of differing religious faiths, believe in karma. Even many devout Vietnamese Catholics are convinced that karma exists in some form or other. According to the law of karma, *kriyamana* karma is created by a person's performance of actions in his or her current life and will result in good *prarabdha* and *sanchita* "inherited" karma in the next life. Bad actions in this life will bring bad *prarabdha* and *sanchita* karma in the next life. Given these spiritual convictions, what does Thanh perceive as her duty toward herself and her daughter? Thanh's life provides a clear answer. As the Western religious scholar Damian Keown writes,

What, then, *are* the goods that karmic deeds produce? Or, in the terminology of consequentialism, what is the utility that is maximized by moral action? It seems this must be one of two things. Either it is a moral self-transformation that comes about through the performance of virtuous deeds, or it is the contingent experiential consequences of these deeds such as longevity, health, social, status, and wealth. Since the latter can only be secured through the former, however, the moral imperative for the karmic consequentialist in either case would appear to be "maximize personal moral development." (344)

In trying to atone for Baba Quan's sins with silent suffering, and for her inability to ease the passage of her mother's soul into her next reincarnation by failing to bury her, Thanh seeks to create less of a karmic burden for her own daughter. But Mai's rejection of the validity of Thanh's actions as a "maximized personal moral development" makes the mother's life ever more tragic.

To Mai, Thanh's suffering appears at times self-inflicted, at times the result of pointless nostalgia, and at times plainly incomprehensible. Her mother's concept of suffering as atonement appears mystifyingly "Other," strange, or exotic. Without the continuous guidance provided by living in a Buddhist society where these values are self-evident, Mai fails to empathize with her mother's spiritual plight. For mainstream Americans, suffering is at least a nuisance, and much time, effort, and energy is devoted to its abolition. But the American conception of suffering is very far from the Buddhist meaning of suffering that Thanh has absorbed. Hershock explains the complex idea of Buddhist suffering:

In actuality, whenever we speak of "my suffering," we are not merely making an assertion about a generic transformation of consciousness

that we are at this point accidentally enduring. Rather, we are speaking the names of our friends, relatives, and enemies and the relations established with them through particular intentions we have formed, the karma we have created. In this sense, while suffering is irreducibly personal . . . no suffering is in reality “mine”—something I can possess or dispossess. And so, while suffering is always uniquely embedded in a history in which I am a principle player, it is never mine alone but always ours. (690)

Thus, Thanh is worried that her suffering, as well as that of her mother, her grandfather, and even that of her country will extend into Mai’s life. To preclude this possibility, Thanh leads her life in a fashion that her own Americanized daughter views as increasingly bizarre.

As *Monkey Bridge* demonstrates, Thanh’s belief in karma also deeply affects the nature and quality of her relationship with her increasingly recalcitrant daughter. For Thanh, the mother-daughter bond is reinforced by the ties of karma binding two related souls. From this belief, Thanh deduces a nearly personal responsibility for the fate of her family, her clan, and her country. Like concentric circles emanating from her soul, the lives of others are affected by her in direct proportion to their distance from herself. Alone and in exile, worrying about the fate of her daughter, her family and her nation, Thanh is overcome by her stark sense of oppression that ultimately negates her Buddhist beliefs in perseverance and patient endurance.

Complex texts such as *Monkey Bridge* allow the author to demonstrate how, as Elaine Kim writes, “Asian American writers are ever more comfortable expressing their dissatisfaction within American society while continuing their search for identity, beauty, and meaning through literature” (278). In the end, Thanh proves to be weaker than the precepts of her Buddhist religion would demand, and she succumbs to despair. She cannot free herself from her own emotional, mental, and cultural baggage. She cannot act according to the advice of Thich Nhat Hanh:

When we recognize the roots of affliction in us and become one with them, whether we are entrapped in them or not depends on our state of mind . . . When we are mindful, we can see our roots of affliction clearly and transform them. Therefore, it is essential to see our roots of affliction in mindfulness. (131)

Thanh’s final despair is excruciating. Lan Cao’s finely crafted character shows the limits of Buddhist faith in saving in one’s lifetime a lost soul. In addition to her personal pain, Thanh worries about losing forever her

spiritual bonds to Mai. The true tragedy of the novel may lie in the fact that a religion born out of a deep desire to comfort humanity cannot save Thanh. Her faith brought across a monkey bridge to the far shore cannot be passed onto the next generation. Instead, Mai finds personal salvation in such Western concepts as self-fulfillment through individualism, education, and a future career.

Yet in Mai's yearning for education—and perhaps wisdom—there may also be discovered the roots of a Buddhist quest for spiritual tranquility, true wisdom, and enlightenment. The karma Thanh fails to atone for in her own life may still be transformed by Mai's actions. Indeed, Thanh succeeds in revealing the true source of her full suffering to Mai, thus making sure her legacy does make it across the monkey bridge. While Mai may have yet to appreciate the full gift of her mother's legacy, a Buddhist could find comfort in the thought that even Thanh's soul, in its next reincarnation, may find the strength to let go of any obsessive attachment to the past and achieve a more fulfilled life, accumulating positive *kriyamana* karma. There is nothing in Lan Cao's moving novel to preclude such an interpretation. Mai's love for Thanh and her representation of her mother's haunted past convey the hope that Mai, too, in her own way and as a fully acculturated Asian American, will come to treasure her mother's legacy as they traveled on their monkey bridge to America.

#### NOTES

1. Kim Phuc survived her injuries in part due to Western medical aid and attention afterward. Tired of being used as anti-American propaganda tool after 1975 by the Vietnamese government, Kim Phuc and her Vietnamese husband defected to Canada in 1992; her life is told in Denise Chong's biography *The Girl in The Picture* (2000).

2. Her two autobiographies are *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993). Oliver Stone's adapted her books in his film *Heaven and Earth* (1993).

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# ‘Opening the Hand of Thought’

*The Meditative Mind in Charles Johnson’s Dr. King’s  
Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*

GARY STORHOFF

*“I cannot help but marvel at the striking analogues between meditation and moments of intense creative inspiration, and how both overlap in my life and literary offerings.” (Charles Johnson on meditation, Ghosh 373)*

*“It is not a privilege to meditate, but a responsibility.” (Jack Kornfield 26)*

*“Although language occasionally ‘describes’ meditation, it never ‘captures’ it.” (Dale S. Wright, Philosophical Meditations 170)*

To those readers who intimately know the work of Charles Johnson, his publication of the text on Buddhism, *Turning the Wheel*, came as no surprise, since Johnson’s religious devotion has been amply discussed, both by him in interviews and in criticism of his fiction. The major criticism of his work has to varying degrees emphasized Buddhism as a thematic principle. Jonathan Little’s 1997 book on Johnson provides the first full-length assessment of Johnson as a Buddhist artist, William Nash has discussed Buddhism in great depth, and I have argued that Buddhism is a linchpin of his corpus (1).<sup>1</sup> Charles Johnson’s great achievement is to have created

a sustained, unique, complexly interdisciplinary perspective in contemporary literature, a vision that is based at least partly on his Buddhist meditative practice. His work, to use Dale S. Wright's formulation in the epigraph above, reflects recognizable features of the most well-known Buddhist meditational experiences.

Johnson's meditative style throughout his career—marked by detached contemplation, suspending the ego, grappling with but then letting go of ideas—may be familiar to many Buddhists as monastic forms of Mahayana Buddhism's meditation. Meditation is intended to be religiously transformative, where the meditator's view is cleansed of distortion and liberated from the entanglement of an ego-centered, dualistic, and intensely subjective epistemology: what Buddhists call "samsara." However, meditative practice as a narratological principle is unusual in American contemporary fiction.<sup>2</sup> Although Johnson consistently develops meditative themes, these tendencies are especially notable in Johnson's recent literary production, *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Bedtime Stories*.<sup>3</sup> This volume is a collection of eight stories; of those, five—"Sweet Dreams," "Better Than Counting Sheep," "Cultural Relativity," "Dr. King's Refrigerator," and "The Queen and the Philosopher"—were originally written for the Humanities Washington's "Bedtime Stories," which commissions local Seattle writers to read new stories yearly to a live audience, all based on a topic given to the participating authors.<sup>4</sup>

Given the Humanities Washington series' title of "Bedtime Stories," it is no surprise that *Dr. King's Refrigerator* forms its plot lines around wakefulness and sleeping, a motif that Johnson develops from a Buddhist perspective. Like Kosho Uchiyama, a Japanese Zen master and abbot of Antaiji monastery (1965–1975), Johnson compares meditation to sleep because both involve letting go of rational consciousness or, as Uchiyama asserts, an "opening [of] the hand of thought": "Thinking means to be grasping or holding on to something with our brain's conceptual 'hand.' But if we open it, if we don't conceive, what is in our hand falls away." Uchiyama emphasizes that meditation does not mean that while meditating, no thoughts will occur; he explains that even if a person sits like a rock, the person will not become the rock and thoughts will indeed occur to the meditator. But, Uchiyama writes, "if a person chases after thoughts, he is thinking and no longer meditating" (30–31). An example of Johnson's dramatization of a person chasing after thoughts, with no recourse to meditative technique, is the introductory story, "Sweet Dreams." As its title suggests, the story revolves around the narrator's Kafkaesque dream, where the Federal government has passed a "Dream Tax"; the narrator has been called in for an audit and must pay \$91,645.14, including fines for

under-reporting his dreams. Despite the fact that the story is a dream (a comic nightmare), the dream world varies only minimally from the narrator's actual waking world. Ordinary time and space are merely reshaped, with a grim IRS auditor, a Seattle setting, and slightly more weird tax regulations. During his dream, the narrator really does not change from his normal, waking state, and he exhibits the same kinds of anxieties and desires as he does while awake—he is anxious about his money, he relishes his erotic attractions, he hates his mother-in-law, he considers whether 9/11 was a precipitating factor of a national economy decline, and so forth. The narrator of "Sweet Dreams," then, is a dreamer but not a meditator, since his desire is predominant.<sup>5</sup>

This difference between meditation and "chasing after thoughts" is clarified further in the volume as Johnson often attempts to depict meditation by showing what it is not. These stories explore the forms and qualities of human suffering (*dukkha*). For example, the humorously named narrator of "Better Than Counting Sheep," Herwin Throckmorton, suffers from insomnia, a condition brought on because instead of sleeping, he is excited about his ideas regarding mathematics, the possibility of extraterrestrial life, genetic engineering, and so forth. Although the primary target of the story's satire is dull academic meetings (and the boring novels of Dean Koontz, Jacqueline Susann, and Tom Clancy), the story's Throckmorton is also the butt of a Buddhist joke. Employing a Buddhist psychology, a reader would recognize that the real cause of his insomnia is that Throckmorton is chasing after his own thoughts because what is predominant is his ego-centered preoccupation with his demands on the world. This theme is especially clear in his absorption in mathematical problems, since he is hoping that he might win the \$1 million prize for solving the "Poincare Conjecture" (79). But on more subtle levels, he does not notice that he is projecting his self into the world to organize and control it; that he is becoming attached to his own "brooding" (79) about of seemingly impersonal subjects such as Martians and the Human Genome Project; and that his own brooding has led him to covert expectations about the world, as he wishes to remake it in the image of his own desire. "Brooding" entails a sense that he will be unhappy if the world does not work out in exactly the way he wishes. A Buddhist would say that Throckmorton's suffering—not just his insomnia, but his general approach to life—comes from his thoughts suffused with his desire, which in turn come from his ego. From Johnson's Buddhist perspective, Throckmorton is deeply enmeshed in the self, precisely what the meditator seeks to escape. As Johnson writes in *Turning*, "In Vipassana "insight meditation . . . you do not ignore these fugitive wanderings of the mind, its tendency to go AWOL at the first opportunity, but instead

carefully observe and identify each erumpent mental act as it appears, like clouds passing across the sky or waves on water . . . and then you let them go" (37). Unlike a true meditator, Throckmorton cannot let his brooding go; he cannot "open the hand of thought."

Throckmorton is Johnson's parody of the Romantic, imaginative self, congratulating himself on his ideas that covertly flow from desire. To overlook Johnson's tendency to parody the questing, assertive, imaginative mind—the foil in this volume to the meditative mind—leads to major distortions in interpreting Johnson's work. One critic particularly hostile to Johnson's approach is Molly Abel Travis. In Travis's comparison of Johnson to Toni Morrison and her novel *Beloved*, Travis conceives of Johnson and Morrison as bookend authors of contemporary African-American fiction, to Johnson's considerable detriment. Travis presents the familiar argument that Morrison attempts to give voice to those anonymous speakers who inhabit "gaps in personal memory and cultural history" (that is, black women, slaves, and escaped slaves) in order to articulate a "black feminist aesthetic"; Johnson, in contrast to Morrison's militancy, "leaves behind the notion of a memory to be recovered" in order to "transcend the concept of race" and to "reassure the white male reader." For Travis, Johnson's assimilationist political stance leads him to oppose progressive social and political change regarding race.<sup>6</sup> His "political conservatism" is based, according to Travis, on his reliance on an exclusively Western tradition, which in turn may have a quasi-psychological foundation: Travis avers that Johnson may suffer from "a postcolonial inferiority complex that compels . . . African American critics to assign value to African texts by using European literature and culture as the universal standard" (192). Travis's disapproval of Johnson's "transcendence of race" arises from her observation in the essay that politically and socially, "we are a long way from being able to transcend race" (195).<sup>7</sup>

Part of the difficulty of responding to Travis's argument against Johnson's work is her lack of definition for what she sees as Johnson's transcendence.<sup>8</sup> As we shall see in this essay, for a Buddhist the term transcendence means release from a constricting, ego-centric view of experience (*samsara*) to perceive and commit oneself to the ordinary world as it really is, in its full plenitude, apart from one's dualistic subjectivity. In Johnson's work, transcendence entails an expansion of our identity, an expansion that becomes all-inclusive of the community within which we exist. One's range and variety of relationships are enlarged to the furthest reaches of compassionate identity with others.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, Johnson's transcendence of race seems in Travis's essay to be a trance-like state oblivious to all worldly phenomena, especially race, and so Travis, a white critic, places herself in

the awkward position of attempting to remind Johnson that he is black. Readers of Johnson familiar with his commitment to Buddhism, however, realize that his conception of race is far too complicated to be summed up with the word "transcendence." Johnson's work explores the relativity of racial categories—contingent and wholly depending upon context. Racial categories, though usually hurtful, are at times necessary, but often they are not, depending on circumstances. Johnson has often dismissed race as an absolute category; nevertheless, race is also a generating principle in almost all of his work. It is Johnson's view of racial categories as contingent that Travis seems to find objectionable, but Johnson's subtlety in the treatment of race and essences cannot be underestimated. If we assume a fixed essence, for example, then it follows that the human being as a person cannot change; no growth or enlightenment can possibly occur—and Johnson's plots are almost always constructed around his protagonist undergoing vast changes, especially in his or her view of race and personal identity. But Travis over-reads Johnson's dismissal of race in attempting to force him into a dichotomy: if there were no essence whatsoever (even in a relative sense), as she assumes Johnson is really saying, what is to prevent a person from magically changing into something else entirely—another person, a tree, a horse?

In *Dr. King's Refrigerator*, Johnson's story "Cultural Relativity" humorously makes this point. To understand the story's meaning, the reader must recognize Johnson's underlying religious contexts in questioning substantialist, personal essences and his refusal to accept conventional ideas of identity—racial, ethnic, or personal. Johnson's *kōan*-like story makes the point that the distinction one makes between personal essence or no personal essence is only relative; to advocate one without a sense of the other leads to absurdity. The protagonist, a young female college student named Felicia Brooks, falls in love with a study-abroad student from Africa, Fortunata Maafa. Partly because Fortunata is an African prince, Felicia finds Fortunata exceptionally attractive, except for one major cultural difference between the lovers: Fortunata refuses to allow Felicia to kiss him because of mysterious African cultural practices that he refuses to reveal to her. Eager to remake Fortunata into her image of an American boyfriend—Johnson writes, "he was her very own Galatea, and she was his Pygmalion" (13)—she finally catches Fortunata unawares and kisses him—but then he immediately changes into a frog! By ignoring what makes Fortunata so unusual, Felicia has lost him entirely (at least in human form). For Johnson, the distinction between a personal essence or no personal essence is only relative to the context. To advocate one pole exclusively and exclude the other leads one into epistemological dualism that the story satirizes.

Despite the story's humor, however, Johnson presents another grim lesson on the danger of desire that has its basis in the Buddhist understanding of human craving: to desire the other so intensely is to lose the other by making him or her into a merely self-reflective image. For a typical American reader brought up on conventional romance, blissful union comes from love; from the perspective of Johnson's Buddhist aesthetic, love comes from acceptance of the other's difference and from meditative detachment. Thus, Johnson's stories—even his seemingly nonsensical ones such as "Cultural Relativity"—remind us of his complexity in dealing with the self and with essences, racial or otherwise. Johnson's apparent inconsistency of maintaining simultaneously both the views of essence and nonessence is far more challenging to American critics than maintaining one view exclusively, as apparently Travis does, and this complexity derives at least partly from his commitment to Buddhism.

Why is such an otherwise astute and intelligent critic as Travis so obtuse in reading Johnson's work? Criticism of Johnson's work too often reflects readers' cultural expectations of Johnson personally—of what an African American writer *should* write, whose core values are presumably inherent in the Western tradition, especially the value of a Romantic notion of the self. These assumptions are more important than reading differences, usually the crux of most interpretive conflicts over other authors. Exerting control imaginatively over the world is almost never a virtue in Johnson's work; indeed, release from an ego-driven imagination is often his primary virtue. Perhaps this theme is most clearly dramatized in the political story "Executive Decision," which, as Johnson says, may be the only published short story that dramatizes the issue of affirmative action (122–123). Those with some knowledge or experience of Buddhist insight meditation techniques (*vipassana bhavana*) will recognize in the story a meditative paradigm: loss of consciousness of self, a suppression of feelings and desires, a release from conceptualizations, language, and categorizations—all replaced by greater spiritual knowledge and an increase or widening of a vision of life.<sup>10</sup>

The plot of "Executive Decision" concerns a company's white CEO who must decide between hiring a white woman or a black man for an executive position in his company. Indebted to the characters of "Bartleby the Scrivener," the story features an unnamed narrator who, like Melville's somewhat smug attorney, is "dull and safe, portly and bald" (56–57). In deciding between the two candidates, the narrator consults with his senior executives, Turk (who favors Claire Bennett, the female applicant) and Nips (who supports the black candidate, Leslie Childs). The CEO must decide who will become the story's surrogate of Bartleby, and the

plot's foreshadowing suggests Childs will be the eventual choice, since he even says, "I would prefer not to" (65). The CEO's choice is made difficult because in terms of talent and ability, the two candidates are equivalent, but they show that they are very different during the interview process. In contrast to Bennett's collegiality and good humor during her interview, Childs "never seemed to relax, or let his hair down, or get too comfortable" (64), instead supplying the interviewers with statistics on the plight of African Americans rather than attempting to set them at their ease. Turk and Nips briefly argue the merits of the two candidates, reminisce about philosophical papers on John Rawls written in college, and debate affirmative action and corporate social responsibility. The narrator struggles with his decision throughout the night, and the next morning he finally decides to choose Childs.

As is typical of Johnson's subtlety, the narrator's decision must be interpreted on different levels—one of which is in fact based on racial essences. Johnson develops the complexity of multiple levels in the story partly because of the Buddhist concept of *upaya-kausalya* ("skillful means"), the idea that enlightened Buddhists purposefully spoke at a variety of levels simultaneously as a means of communicating with people who are at different stages of spiritual development.<sup>11</sup> Buddha, deploying "skillful means" to his listeners of greater spiritual awareness, assumed his words would be interpreted symbolically by listeners of greater spiritual awareness; to those listeners at a lower level of development, Buddha assumed his words would be interpreted more literally, but his sermon would nevertheless assist them toward enlightenment. Johnson's story is a good example of skillful means (indeed, his entire literary career could be described as his exercise of skillful means).

Partly because she is white, Claire Bennett seems more compatible with the group, and her friendly husband—"a shaggy, bearded, Old English sheepdog of a fellow," a sculptor who is an expert on antiques (61)—seems to cement the decision in Bennett's favor: the narrator even looks forward to becoming family friends with the Bennetts. Moreover, none of the three men are comfortable with Childs (70), and their discomfort—based clearly on racial difference—is a key to Johnson's political commentary on affirmative action. Sociologists have coined a term for a subtle but pervasive form of discomfort experienced by whites who are among blacks that the story's executives experience with Childs: "aversive racism." With aversive racism in play, the interviewers have internalized the American cultural values of fair play, justice, and a repugnance toward overt racism; yet simultaneously they have unknowingly accepted the values of white superiority that permeate American culture. As John Dovidio writes, "The existence,

both of almost unavoidable racial biases and of the desire to be egalitarian and racially tolerant, forms the basis of the ambivalence that aversive racists experience" (86).

Johnson's support of affirmative action in the story derives from his dramatization of aversive racism: that people of whatever race tend to be more comfortable around people who look like them or who have the same background, especially when it comes to what Johnson calls "sam-saric illusion of race" (Whalen-Bridge "Interview" 303). Despite the fact that Claire is a woman, she is much more like the three interviewers than is Childs in terms of her background—her class, education, work history, and most importantly, her race. It is not surprising, then, the interviewers gravitate toward Claire; their preference for her is one more instance of white privilege. Because she has an inherent advantage as a white person (even as a woman), Johnson's narrative reminds the reader that affirmative action policies must be in place to guard against unconscious tendencies of familiar association, especially in situations where blacks are the target beneficiaries of affirmative action policies. Like Melville's narrator, Johnson's narrator has throughout his adulthood wanted to be a "safe" Person but he nevertheless chooses Childs and decides to make his environment temporarily "unsafe" (that is, "uncomfortable") for himself and his other employees, just as Melville's narrator's equilibrium has been disturbed by Bartleby. Johnson's story ends optimistically. Just as the firm was somewhat disrupted by the hiring of Turk (who also made people uncomfortable, but who got the job because he was the narrator's friend), this firm will presumably feel more comfortable with Childs as time goes on: "It takes time to know anyone," the narrator says (74). Without disallowing racial differences, Johnson implies that the long-term improvements intended by affirmative action require a willingness to endure short-term discomfort.

As an explanation of why the narrator chooses Childs, the story's second thematic level resonates with Johnson's subtle meditative theme. On this level of the story, rational persuasion and logical argument—so important for the first level of the story's meaning—are set aside in favor of the narrator's understanding a deeper, spiritual truth: Johnson's "skillful means" leads to a spiritual idea that reverses or qualifies the story's more literal meaning. Buddhism has long argued that linear thought and discursive logic have limitations, and though rational thought is not rejected, those limitations can be overcome through meditation.<sup>12</sup> In the story, argumentation between the executives has gotten the narrator nowhere, and after Nips and Turk leave, the narrator sets aside language and linear thinking as a means of deciding: "All night you have worried this question into mere words, a

blur of sound signifying, it seems, nothing" (70). Instead of further pursuing a yet more rationalized, critical, and judicative process, the narrator minimizes his rationalizing process and embraces a kind of relaxation of thought; as Uchiyama might put it, the narrator "opens the hand of thought": "Wearily, you push [their c.v.s] away, close your eyes, and drift in and out of sleep until sunlight brightens the room" (71). As Johnson shows, the meditative state, unlike dreaming, is characterized by a calming of mental activity—especially activity that resembles the ordinary consciousness. As a Buddhist would say, the narrator attempts to quiet the mind.

To understand the narrator's "quieting the mind," we must examine ordinary consciousness from a Buddhist point of view. To a Buddhist, the mind is similar to a wild and drunken monkey in a cage, moving from one place to another with seemingly no purpose or direction; the mind's content in ordinary waking life is a flow—transitory, chaotic, unregulated, and inevitably colored by desire. Through meditation, Buddhists like Johnson practice watching the mind's movements, all to recognize the mind's illusory, insubstantial, and ego-filled nature. The meditator's awareness of the flow of thought and feeling comes at those crucial transitional moments between usually diverse images and thoughts; since the meditator is not "attached" to each thought, with an "opening hand" he welcomes the emergence of a succession of thoughts. The transitions between the thoughts are usually quite obvious and revelatory. Unlike Throckmorton of "Better Than Counting Sheep," the meditator does not suffuse thoughts with his own craving, and is therefore detached from the contents of his consciousness. Whereas in ordinary waking life, people are concerned with preserving and evaluating the content of thought, the meditative mind is instead conscious of the *movement* of the mind. The meditator does not need to direct or control his consciousness toward some desired end. As Johnson writes in *Turning*, "In Vipassana [the meditator] does not interpret evanescent mental phenomenon as they arise. It is quite enough to simply recognize the brief, flicker-flash passing of a feeling *as* no than more [sic] a feeling, a transitory mind-created object *as* no more than a mind-object" (30). As Johnson so often argues, the meditator recognizes that consciousness is revealed to be an ongoing flow, a process, a "verb"; not a static thing, a "noun" (*Turning* 10). Optimally, the meditator will end the session with a more expansive vision of reality and an increased understanding of himself or herself in the world by experientially realizing the illusion of the world's categories—including the category of self. As Peter Harvey writes concerning vipassana meditation, "[Meditation] 'tunes' the mind, making it a more adequate instrument for knowledge and insight" (253).

Clearly, the narrator of “Executive Decision” is not a Buddhist nor does he self-consciously meditate, but his spiritual development is Johnson’s metaphor for the meditative process. This section of the story is faithful metaphorically to the experience of meditation, where after a period or moment of calm, the internal voices are likely to recur with exaggerated power to distract and confuse.<sup>13</sup> To understand the narrator’s meditative experience, the reader must read the story less for *content* (what precisely has been written) and more closely for transitions—those moments that on the surface seem inconsequential and deflective from the story’s subject but that direct the reader toward the narrator’s meditative mind. The narrator’s consciousness goes back and forth in time, reporting on apparently unimportant details, but at these nodal points the narrator is gradually experiencing greater degrees of enlightenment.

Briefly, we must go over this meditative sequence. When the secretary Gladys arrives at the firm in the morning, the narrator undergoes a sequence of seemingly unconnected but associative thoughts and perceptions, one leading to another: he sees the closet, then his shirts, then recalls his father’s shirts, and his childhood where from the closet he watched his father dictate letters to Gladys. This transitional point, it turns out, is critical: the reader observes that the narrator’s own hiring quandary is linked to his father’s relationship with Gladys, whom his father hired as secretary—a subtle connection that reflects the narrator’s concern about hiring. The next series of reflections exposes the narrator’s concern for race. The narrator perceives an Ellington tune, sees Gladys’s black hair, then thinks of Halle Berry. At that moment, as the image of the light-skinned movie star flashes across his consciousness, the narrator spontaneously moves toward greater spiritual understanding. He has, as Peter Harvey would say, “tuned” his mind. He intuits that Gladys may have had an affair with his father and, further, that she may be partly black: “Gladys is black. Or is she? By all appearances, she is as white as you” (73). In fact, his father may have knowingly hired—then slept with—a black person. Suddenly for the narrator, the reality of racial categories—so important for the affirmative action theme in the story—dissolve. The narrator experiences spiritually what Johnson has emphasized in all his work and his interviews—the “chimerical” nature of racial categories and the deconstruction of self and race: the narrator understands, “Categories were chimerical. Mere constructs” (73). At that point, and at that point only, he is willing to hire Childs.

Arrived at through an approximation of the meditative process, the narrator’s “executive decision” affirms a Buddhist ontology: what the narrator thinks about and argues over with his colleagues (racial categories), do not truly exist, even though these very same categories are indeed relevant

to him (and the nation) in certain circumstances like the hiring process. The narrator is capable of overcoming his sense of difference from Gladys and (by extension) Childs, and he experientially understands what is ontologically real: the actual people themselves and their needs. He no longer assumes that his needs, especially the need for "comfort" and "safety," are superior, and he is on his way to dissolving his attachment to his ego. In other words, the narrator has indeed transcended race by potentially realizing his oneness with all people, even as Melville's narrator also understands (perhaps only dimly) his connection with Bartleby at the story's end: "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!" (34).

Johnson makes it clear in "Executive Decision" that before the narrator can help another person, he must first begin to break out of his own chains of selfhood, for to make the decision to hire Childs merely on the basis of quotas or from his possible racial guilt, for example, would be a real evasion of his responsibility to help others and help transform the world; indeed, the beneficial results from this kind of inauthentic hiring practice are certain to be short-lived and most likely would result in greater harm in the long run—perhaps by increasing his indifference to the broader discrimination against African-Americans, not only in the workplace but in society generally. Meditation is central not only to the narrator's attempt to choose but also to his possibility of beginning to change the world, and hiring Childs is at least a start in that direction.

The story, then, makes a connection between religious practice and social praxis. In "Executive Decision," the narrator has no intention initially of transforming the world; nevertheless, as he is cleansed of distortion and prejudice, through his *inner* transformation, he is poised to overcome the dualistic subjectivity of race that is the fundamental cause of racial problems, and the distinction between religious and political realms is gradually erased. The linkage between the transformation of self and political action is also the subject of "The Gift of the Osuo," which Jonathan Little rightly calls a "compressed Buddhist fairy tale" (132). In this story, Johnson begins by complimenting the rare good king Shabaka Malik al Muhammad—one of the "few generous and gentle men" who have ever ruled the Allmuseri (33), Johnson's mythical African tribe. The story begins, then, with the primary question in the reader's mind: what has made Shabaka such a successful, good king?

The narrative's answer is discovered in Shabaka's meditative experience. After resolving a debate between two Osuo (sorcerers), Shabaka is given a magic chalk that transforms whatever Shabaka draws on the wall into a phenomenal object. He begins by sketching a gigantic spear, and immediately a spear appears in his hut. With this newfound toy, he begins

by creating treasures such as hides, live animals, and other valuables, which he immediately gives to his people. At first, he seems wholly motivated by altruistic feelings and says, “one must will goodness and prosperity for others” (45). This apparent generosity, however, is temporary; and as Shabaka becomes more practiced with his chalk, he begins to create more sinister images that come to life. He creates his tribe’s gods and goddesses, who rebuke him; armies of warriors who pledge their fealty to him; then finally, he creates the dead woman Noi, for whom he had lusted in his youth. When Noi appears from the dead, he frees himself for marriage to her with his magic chalk by creating the deaths of his wife and Noi’s husband. At that point, he increases his political power by fomenting conflict between his adversaries, enlarging his nation’s boundaries, and creating his heir in his beautiful son Asoka. However, Shabaka’s imperialist plans eventually go awry when slave traders arrive in Africa and form a coalition with Shabaka’s enemies to defeat the Allmuseri; eventually, Asoka is killed, Noi commits suicide, and Shabaka is led away in chains—to be killed or sold into slavery. But at the story’s conclusion, Shabaka awakens, “staring stupidly at the unmarked wall” (53), and realizes that the nightmare narrative was only an admonitory dream.

Shabaka’s magical dream, his meditative practice, his sensuality with Noi, and the allusive texture of this story provide a connection to both Tantric Buddhism, a path within Mahayana Buddhism based on texts known as “tantras”; and Zen, which itself means “meditation.” According to the *Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism*, Tantric Buddhism often “deals with practices which are more magical in character than spiritual” (292), and in Tantrism, dreams, visualizations, and some artistic creations are considered as authentic—perhaps even more so—than waking, cognitive experiences, and may disclose to the individual the true nature of reality more so than rational experience. Tantrists further believe that exceptionally vivid images and sensual experience, including sexual experience, may lead the practitioner to enlightenment. Finally, Shabaka’s wall-gazing at the story’s end is a clear allusion to Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of Zen who stared at a wall for nine years. Within this context of Asian meditative practice generally, then, the story’s moral design seems clear. The images Shabaka creates with his chalk—a metaphor for his concealed forms of desire—lead him to greater enlightenment regarding himself and his role as king of his country.<sup>14</sup>

Especially because he is a ruler, Shabaka’s obligation is to free himself from his own desire, for such release will benefit his people as well as himself. On the pragmatic level of statesmanship, Buddhism has historically claimed nonviolence (*ahimsa*) as a central virtue. Even rulers are expected

to practice *ahimsa*; in the Jataka Tales, texts about reincarnations of the Buddha, Buddha as a bodhisattva-king renounces violence to defend his state. He declares, "None shall suffer because of me. Let those who covet kingdoms seize mine, if they will" (Ives 140). Perhaps Johnson's deft allusion to Buddhist history in statesmanship makes Shabaka's epiphany a plausible model for contemporary rulers who too often turn first to violence to achieve their political ends. Shabaka names his son, Asoka, the name of a great Indian king (c. 299–237 B.C.E.). The historical Asoka initially attempted, like Shabaka in the story, to extend his empire through violent conquest. In the course of his destructive campaigns, however, Asoka became disgusted with the cruelty of warfare and renounced it. He converted to Buddhism and declared that all further conquests should be commitments of religion, and his rule was marked by generosity, kindness, and good will to his subjects and to other nation-states. In *Turning*, Johnson recommends Asoka as a model for contemporary rulers: "in his edicts [he] embraced generosity, compassion, refraining from killing, love of truth, inner insight, and harmonious relations with neighboring states" (44).

Throughout the story, Shabaka acts in exactly the opposite fashion from the historical Asoka; Shabaka's every whim, desire, and lust he attempts to satisfy with his magic chalk. Even the initial drawings, seemingly to help his people, were in fact intended to aggrandize Shabaka; as he realizes, he "had acted to end hunger, need, want, and—behold—each act of the ego engendered suffering" (53). A Buddhist would describe Shabaka's dream as deriving from the Three Poisons: ignorance, greed, and hatred. Each of Shabaka's choices stems from the Three Poisons that harm him and others. His lust for Noi leads to murdering his wife and Noi's husband, and he finally attempts to destroy the hostile tribes near his kingdom. His mayhem and destruction is accomplished to make him "the wealthiest, the happiest, the most loved man" in Africa (48). His behavior only sets up a karmic reaction when enemy tribes repay his violence with violence of their own. All these thoughts Shabaka observes as if he were in a movie theater, observing images on a screen: violence causes immediate pain and suffering, but also triggers further violence, and in the ensuing cycle causes continuous suffering—all serving to increase Shabaka's egocentricity, self-aggrandizement, and hatred.

Shabaka learns, then, the lessons of karma, and on this level Johnson introduces larger ethical issues of social responsibility. Shabaka learns more clearly from his meditation his own role in the world, and understands his responsibility for the character he creates day by day which sets in motion forces of suffering, which may finally be ineluctable. The creator, in this story, has been transformed by his creation. The reciprocity of cause

and effect that the story enacts is for Buddhist philosophy an underlying principle, particularly emphatic in the domain of ethics. Ethical choices and one's character are mutually determining, based on the doctrine of dependent origination, since Buddhist philosophy holds that one's choice and one's character originate dependently on each other. One's moral decisions cumulatively shape one's character, while the character that is created, decision by decision, establishes a limiting range of possibilities for future moral choices that one might make. Karma holds that once that choice has been made, it becomes a part of one; one will always and forever be that choice. From this perspective, the past is never really gone but an ever present aspect of daily experience, for even minor decisions and desires can shape the future. Thus, Shabaka's desire for Noi, and his regret that he could not marry her, has led him not only to detest his wife, but also to bring Noi back from the dead, to murder his wife and Noi's husband—and those brutalities make it easier for his other consecutive actions of destruction that finally end his kingdom. Through his meditation, Shabaka understands the importance of ethically cultivating ordinary life and mentality.

By observing Shabaka in meditation, the reader can infer why Shabaka became a historically great king: through observing his own thoughts as they passed before him, he came to realize that the shared ignorance, greed, and hatred led karmically to greater suffering. This meditation had a religiously transformative effect on him. Through understanding his common humanity with those he would have otherwise subjugated, he realized that he directly contributed not only to the suffering of others, but also to the pain of those closest to him—his wife, son, and subjects. He himself experiences a complete loss of inner peace, and there is no conclusion for his suffering until his death. Shabaka realizes that before his negative, greedy, selfish, angry thoughts completely dominate his mind, he must gain mastery over them. He discovers that the only remedy for violence is the transformation of his character, and then that transformation can extend to family, village, and the whole of his society. At that point, Shabaka begins to become the good king of legend, since his presumptive actions as ruler from that point emerge from his awakening.<sup>15</sup> He has overcome the simple idea that trying to do the right thing can lead inevitably to good choices for his people; he is ready to work compassionately for his people because he is no longer as grounded in his own egocentric desire.

Through Shabaka's meditative dream, Johnson comments on the interrelationship between religious transformation and social change, and in this context he is at variance with basic Marxist thought and much Christian liberationist theology, which envisage the transformation of individuals as mainly a goal for the future, to be sought *after* social and political

transformation. For Johnson, the starting point—and for Buddhism generally—is the individual; from this perspective, no true social transformation can be accomplished without a spiritual transformation of the human beings making up that society. Yet the story also avoids a too simple dualism between the public and the private, since both transformations should originate dependently, and therefore individual transformation and social transformation should ideally be striven for simultaneously. As Johnson writes in a political essay for a Buddhist audience, “In our brief passage through this life, we must have both inner and outer revolutions, since the former is essential for deepening the latter” (“Be Peace Embodied” 33).

Spiritual awakening that allows a leader to help his society is the subject of the title story, “Dr. King’s Refrigerator.” The story is based on a quotation from King that Johnson includes in *Turning*, also partly included in the story itself (29):

We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women. . . .  
When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge provided for us by a Pacific Islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a Frenchman. The towel is provided by a Turk. Then at the table we drink coffee, which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese, or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs, we are beholden to more than half the world. (*Turning* 10)

Written in the richly comic mode, the story is about King’s moment of inspiration for this “infernal unwritten sermon, which hung over his head like the sword of Damocles” (24). In the middle of the night in 1954, having decided before working on the sermon to have a midnight snack, King “gazed—and gazed” at the variety of food in his refrigerator (25). He empties his refrigerator, again gazes at the amassed food, and then, because “whatever affects *one* directly, affects *all* indirectly” (29), realizes that “in each grain of rice [is] a fragile, inescapable network of mutuality in which all earthly creatures were codependent, integrated, and tied in a single garment of destiny” (27).<sup>16</sup> The story ends as King has discovered his sermon’s text—as well as ideas he would use later in his civil rights career—and readies himself for bed and presumably for love-making with his wife Coretta. The story’s meaning revolves around King’s mystical insight: “The whole universe is inside our refrigerator!” (28). Besides the clear and positive references to Christian belief, with Coretta’s “tidy, well-scrubbed, Christian kitchen” (26), the story may be profitably understood as having Buddhist meditative overtones, designed to achieve a union of Asian and Christian points of view.

Despite the facetious tone of the story, complete with King pondering a “very spiritually understood grapefruit” and an “ontologically clarified

head of lettuce" (31), the story has an extremely serious subtext. Johnson depicts King as filled with anxiety and worldly cares. King's consciousness is absorbed with what are in reality extraneous concerns. He is anxious about virtually everything: his sermon, which is behind schedule; the high expectations for his success of his father (the famous minister "Daddy King"), his congregation, and the community; his unfinished dissertation, which may jeopardize his marriage and possibly his job; his weight; world hunger; and last—but certainly not least, given the ultimate sacrifice he will make a mere fourteen years later, civil rights, and racial discrimination. However, the story is only tangentially about Kings' racial politics. Even though Johnson treats King with affectionate humor, the reader can see that he is in a state of deep, spiritual suffering (*dukkha*), for he is "attached" to his own thoughts about his career, his marriage, and world justice.<sup>17</sup> Ironically, given his legendary reputation as a selfless martyr, he is as deeply engrossed in egotistic desire as is the insomniac Herwin Throckmorton in "Better than Counting Sheep." Though the story's narrative concern is the inspiration for the sermon, then, the story's theme revolves around King's release from samsara.

This release is accomplished through King's sudden awakening to what Buddhists call emptiness, as symbolized by the "empty" fridge and the phrase "metaphysics of food" (29). As Johnson's King empties his fridge, he also empties himself. Emptiness is a recurring theme for Johnson; as I have written in a different context, "Emptiness (*shunyata*) is perhaps the key concept in understanding Johnson's work" (20). Emptiness in Johnson's Buddhist symbolism is not the same as vacancy, a space that awaits filling: it is not "nothingness" in the sense of the opposite of being or "somethingness." Instead, "emptiness" is the ontological consequence of dependent co-origination. Because of radical contingency, no unconditioned self can be found, and so people, things, and concepts are "empty" of any such unchanging essence. Consequently, all things originate dependently on all other things, and each contingent/provisional self constantly changes in correlation with all those other changing things and events that constitute its matrix of meaning. Each thing derives its character from the infinite number of factors that precipitates its beginnings and partly shapes its end. No one thing, therefore, has its own independent identity, its own integral self untouched or unaffected by other things; rather, all things exist in a relational matrix that is cosmic in extension.

King's vision of Emptiness is the thematic climax of the story, and, besides becoming the text of his sermon, leads to a profound epistemological shift, producing what Johnson in *Turning* terms "epistemological humility" (12–13).<sup>18</sup> No longer does he worry about his many burdens. Instead, he has a sudden realization of the "suchness" of things in all their

specificity (*tathata*). For example, as he helps himself to olives, he understands that "he'd never really *seen* an olive before, or seen one so clearly. Of one thing he was sure: No two olives were the same" (26). That is, he realizes that his linguistic categories and characterizations of things—in this admittedly humorous case, the linguistic construct "olives"—are relative and tentative rather than absolute and undifferentiated, deflecting his consciousness from the extraordinary and miraculously full reality of a thing, unique in itself. In this humorous example, King no longer is attached to his own conceptualization of olives but sees the olive in a cosmic context.

This release from his own rigidified conceptualizations promotes a more profound change in his own character, as King no longer feels either physical or spiritual hunger, but instead "a profound indebtedness and thanksgiving—to everyone and everything in Creation. For was not *he* too the product of infinite causes and the full, miraculous orchestration of being stretching back to the beginning of time?" (27–28). In the story, King's deep gratitude to Creation is consistent with a Buddhist understanding of social obligation, as Johnson emphasizes the continuities between King's vision and Buddhism as interpreted by Thich Nhat Hanh.<sup>19</sup> As Ryusaku Tsunoda has written, "With the perspective of dependent co-arising as its backdrop, the philosophy of debt was the center of Buddhist ethics" (1:48). At least partly from this sense of cosmic indebtedness springs King's deep social commitment. His enlightenment before his empty fridge reveals to him that his well-being as a human being is inseparable from the well-being of all those others with whom he shares a community. King's changed state is made dramatically clear through his relationship with his wife, Coretta. At the beginning of the story, Coretta, though "beautiful and very understanding" (24), seems to add to his many emotional burdens. She has sacrificed her own music career for him, and he feels guilty as he considers the time he must be away from her to complete his sermon and work on his dissertation, even worrying that divorce may be a distinct possibility, as it is for many "ABD's" (All But Dissertation). But at the story's end, as he stands in the mess he has created, he suddenly thinks "how *he* must look through her eyes" (29). He is momentarily released from his desires and cares and is willing to perceive the world through another person's eyes.

*Dr. King's Refrigerator*, then, dramatizes the truth that religious transformation does not occur apart from other people or actual social conditions. Given Johnson's development of the Buddhist concept of dependent origination, the distinction between the meditating individual and the social and political domain dissolves: all actions, including meditative ones,

impact other people, and the individual and society originate dependently upon each other. As Thich Nhat Hanh has written:

Meditation is not to get out of society, to escape from society, but to prepare for a reentry into society. We call this “engaged Buddhism.” When we go to a meditation center, we may have the impression that we leave everything behind—family, society, and all the complications involved in them—and come as an individual in order to search for peace. This is already an illusion, because in Buddhism there is no such thing as an individual. (45)

In Johnson’s work generally and in *Dr. King’s Refrigerator* specifically, Johnson shows that each decision impacts society. The meditative experience is central to this truth; but Johnson goes even further than this by his symbolic representation of meditation. As Buddhists often assert, the more one meditates, the more one is brought into the world, and the more one enters the world, the more one questions the self. As Thich Nhat Hanh has written, “We must practice in a way that removes the barrier between practice and non-practice” (53). Charles Johnson’s fiction dramatizes the process of removing that barrier.

#### NOTES

1. Whalen-Bridge reviews Johnson criticism in “Whole Sight.” For two more important discussions of Buddhism and Johnson’s work, see Gleason and Whalen-Bridge (“Waking Cain”). Nash’s fine discussion of *Turning the Wheel* appeared too late for my use in preparing this chapter.

2. A notable exception to this generalization is Gary Snyder’s poetry. See Whalen-Bridge’s discussion of Snyder’s meditative technique (“Gary Snyder’s Poetic of Right Speech” esp. 209–214). This volume also demonstrates the importance of meditative practice in contemporary American literature; see especially the chapters by Boon on Giorno and Augustine on Ginsberg and Waldman.

3. In her review of the volume, ZZ Packer writes, “Taken together, the collection reads like the narrative version of *kōans*—Zen riddles used to focus the mind during meditation” (7).

4. The topics for the four years Johnson wrote for this program were “Bed-time Stories,” “Insomnia,” “Goodnight Kiss,” and “Midnight Snack.”

5. “Desire” needs refinement, here. In contemporary philosophy, desire denotes any kind of want or preference. Buddhism, however, tends to understand desire more narrowly as the craving for something wanted or the feared loss of something possessed. This afflictive desire (Skt: *tanha*) can include objects not materially connected with oneself, such as Throckmorton’s desire for a solution in higher mathematics in “Sweet Dreams.”

6. On the need to challenge the status quo, Johnson has recently written, "The suffering we have experienced in the world of relativity forces us to relentlessly question 'conventional' truth and the status quo" ("The Dharma of Social Transformation" 61).

7. Travis also alleges that Johnson's work is antifeminist, and her evidence is the presence of a sexist joke told by a character in *Middle Passage* and the fact that many of her friends agree with her. Despite the logical problems with Travis's argument, her essay has received considerable attention in studies of Johnson. Timothy J. Cox has approvingly written that "every reader of Johnson's work . . . should study Travis's arguments" (104). For another discussion highly antagonistic to Johnson's work, see Brown. For a discussion of related issues, see Whalen-Bridge's "Whole Sight."

8. The word "transcendence" has become a shibboleth in Johnson's criticism, even though critics usually misunderstand Johnson's own use of the concept. For most critics, transcendence means a kind of spiritual departure or withdrawal from the world; for example, Peter Hallward writes that "Johnson believes that in order to describe the ultimate truth of the world, you have first to escape it" (133). Similar discussions of Johnson somehow "transcending" something may also be found in S. X. Goudie, who writes that Johnson "tries to escape the dialogics of racism" (117), Ouimet, and Spaulding.

9. Admittedly, the definition of "transcendence" is vexing in Buddhist studies. I am deriving my understanding of transcendence from two very different commentators on Buddhism, Kasulis (esp. 139–154) and Wright (181–206).

10. Johnson's work is replete with images of his protagonists engaged in contemplation, either explicitly or metaphorically (see Storhoff). For a good example of of shamatha meditation, see the description in Johnson's short story "China": "He worked to discipline his mind and maintain one point of concentration; each thought, each feeling that overcame him he saw as a fragile bubble, which he could inspect passionlessly from all sides; then he let it float gently to the surface, and soon—as he slipped deeper into the vortices of himself, into the Void—even the image of himself . . . vanished" (87).

11. The Buddha introduces the concept of skillful means in Chapter 2 of the *Lotus Sutra* and demonstrates its use through parables throughout the text. The Buddha is figured as a wise father guiding immature and foolish children.

12. For a review of contemporary theories of language and Zen Buddhism, and an exposition of an innovative approach to language in meditation, see Wright, "Rethinking Transcendence."

13. Buddha himself, according to legend, faced a similar assault of internal voices under the command of the tempter Mara while under the Bodhi tree immediately before enlightenment.

14. When the story was first published in *African American Review*, Johnson acknowledges Herman Hesse's "The Indian Life" as a source (519). In Hesse's story, the protagonist Dasa also dreams and awakens, though Dasa is apparently not a king. Hesse's story is more a meditation on life as Maya. For a discussion

of Johnson's literary relationship with Hesse, see Byrd and Little (88–89, 104). My reading of this story takes issue with Little, who interprets Shabaka's vision as "a resounding note against the ego-projection and romantic transfigurations that shape artistic creations, thereby severing the connection between the artistic and the social" (133). As I argue, Shabaka's vision brings him into a clearer understanding of the connection between the artistic and the social in that it makes him a better ruler.

15. Mahayana Buddhism includes a practice called the "Six Perfections," The development of character traits that are necessary for the possibility of an enlightened life. The six perfections are the cultivation of generosity, morality, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom. Sometimes the list of six is expanded to ten—see, for example, Johnson's afterword to this volume.

16. These are direct quotations from Martin Luther King Jr. made during the Birmingham campaign in 1963; Johnson directly quotes these passages in *Turning* (9).

17. King experiences much the same suffering in Johnson's magisterial book *Dreamer*. See Storhoff 183–216.

18. By this term, Johnson means in part escaping from the perceptual prison of language; as he writes in *Turning*, "Words can be webs, making us think in terms of essences; language is all concept, but things in the world are devoid of essence, changing as we chase them" (13).

19. I have discussed Johnson's link with Thich Nhat Hanh in *Understanding* (esp. 9–25).

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# Afterword

CHARLES JOHNSON

## I.

During the Q&A that followed a talk I gave called “Storytelling and the Alpha Narrative,” I said something about the importance of finding one’s passion in life, how one’s passion—or desire—always has a greater place in one’s life than one’s profession or various occupations, how it demands a special kind of cultural and spiritual faith, and how, for example, artistic passion, if properly understood, will lead a man or woman to imaginative and intellectual realms they never in their wildest dreams thought they would visit. Quite possibly, I even quoted one of my favorite statements by the late, great meditation teacher from India, Eknath Easwaran, an English professor, a Sanskrit scholar, and a prolific writer and translator. I discovered his work in 1981, and for the last twenty-six years I’ve had his words taped to my desk. What Professor Easwaran said was this: “A well-spent life is one that rounds out what it has begun. The life of a great artist or scientist is usually shaped by a single desire, carried through to the very end.”

After this lecture, a very nice, middle-aged black man approached me. On his face was a look of confusion. He pulled me aside and said, “Dr. Johnson, how do I *find* my passion? I’ve been looking all my life, and I don’t know what it is.” I think I replied hastily and too incompletely by saying, “Your passion is something that finds *you*. It’s something you surrender to, something you embrace because you have no choice.” Looking back, I wish I’d had more time that evening to discuss the question of having a life-long

passion in the career of an artist or a scholar—especially if he (or she) is a black American. I would like to take *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* as an occasion to revisit that question from four years ago, and perhaps this time I can provide a more acceptable and complete answer. In order to do this I must take a two-pronged approach. I have to talk about the universal logic and discipline that lies within the passion for the creative process. But art does not happen outside history. Art is always forged in the tempestuous crucible of a particular historical moment. It is a specific hour in cultural history, in the enveloping society, and in the state of one's profession at a moment in time, which define and determine the real creative and imaginative possibilities for the work of any artist, scientist, educator, or scholar. His methods, the styles the artist selects from, even the questions he will ask—all these are shaped by the specific cultural and historical forms in play (and sometimes out of play) when he begins to create, especially during his years of apprenticeship or when he is a student. And so I would lie, and I would do wrong, if I neglected to address the question of art and race, or if I failed to say something about the kind of America that shaped my own vision of the artist's duties and responsibilities.

Let me start out by saying what I was doing while some of the Beats were first introducing Buddhism to a large American readership. In the 1950s, when I was in elementary school in Evanston, Illinois, I was not the best of students in all my classes. This was because there was only one area or activity I was truly passionate about, and that was drawing. Art class was where I got all my best grades and praise from my teachers. As a child, I would often retreat into drawing as a refuge. In my preteens, there was something magical to me about bringing forth images that hitherto existed only in my head where no one could see them. I remember spending whole afternoons blissfully seated before a three-legged black board my parents got me for Christmas, drawing and erasing until my knees and the kitchen floor beneath me were covered with layers of chalk and the piece in my hand was reduced to a wafer-thin sliver.

Inevitably, by the time I was thirteen or thirteen-and-a-half, the passion for drawing led me to consider a career as a professional artist, which I became when I was seventeen and published my first illustrations (and also my first three very short stories in my high school newspaper). Over the next seven years, between 1965 and 1972, I published well over 1,000 illustrations and drawings, two books of political cartoons, and I taught people how to draw in an early PBS series, called "Charlie's Pad," which was first broadcast in 1970. While drawing was my passion, I also enjoyed writing, but mainly for fun. From the age of twelve, I've filled up diaries, then in college journals in which I'd write long essays to myself, grappling with ideas,

feelings, and cultural questions I needed to externalize on the page as a way of freeing myself from them. But, as I said, the visual arts were for me at that time primary.

Buddhism in America emerged from public spaces, from libraries and coffee shops. From the Evanston Public Library, I lugged home every book on drawing, painting, cartooning, and poured over them, because for me it seemed that each canvass, each drawing, each image was a portal that ever so slightly changed my way of perceiving and imagining the world. The work of others fed my own passion to create, because the ultimate way to respond to a work that one has received as a gift and loves is by answering it with a creative gift of one's own, one offered in the spirit of what a Buddhist calls *dana*, or giving, which, I would learn much later, is one of the ten *paramitas*, or virtues. Up on Capitol Hill, at 1351 East Olive Way, my 25-year-old daughter Elisheba, who is a conceptual artist, opened last February her first business, Faire Gallery/Café, where each month she features the work of a new artist. (And you can also get a wonderful Portobello mushroom with dijon sandwich.) So far she has exhibited the work of between twelve and fifteen painters, installation artists, and photographers. Each month I look forward to opening night with the same thrill I had when I was a teenager, because the gift of art—like the experience of meditation—is always an invitation for the mind to slow down and pay attention. For the audience to be quiet and listen, and listening without the ego in the way is always an act of love. Novelist and critic Albert Murray says that fine art is distinguished by its “range, precision, profundity and the idiomatic subtlety of the rendition.” When we find ourselves in a gallery (or in the transcendental space created by a novel or a poem or in a theater), standing before such a work as Murray describes, we are gently invited to cast aside our presuppositions, to “let go” for just a moment our conditioned ways of seeing the world, and all our explanatory models for experience. Each powerful encounter with art gestures toward the goal of the philosophical method known as phenomenology, which was never about creating new knowledge, but instead only promised to deepen our perception of what we *think* we already know. This method reminds me of how Buddhist teacher Bhikku Bodhi describes the important practice of Right Mindfulness. He said, “The task of Right Mindfulness is to clear up the cognitive field. Mindfulness brings to light experience in its pure immediacy. It reveals the object as it is before it has been plastered over with conceptual paint, overlaid with interpretations.” Of course, Bhikku Bodhi was not who I read in school, nor were the Beats, nor were there any black authors on the 1950s curriculum.

There was, however, a hunger for the defamiliarizing and enlightening effects that draw in many readers of black writers, Buddhist writers,

and other writers who disdain any-ism or static identity altogether. That experience of being shocked into new ways of seeing and knowing—of having the pedestrian replaced by a feeling of mystery and wonder, or having mystery and wonder revealed *in* the pedestrian—was something I hungered for as a child. I felt it was as necessary for my spiritual and emotional and intellectual life as food was for my body. Therefore, I took in everything my teachers placed before me, but you have to remember that this was in the 1950s and early '60s, and works by black authors—or artists of color—were nowhere to be found in the canon or curriculum at the integrated colleges, secondary or elementary schools I attended. Black Studies courses did not exist until 1968 and '69, and I was privileged to participate in the establishing of one when I was an undergraduate. Even in the early 1970s, it was rare for the work of a black author (or artist) to be accepted by major white publishers. In the universe of American education, these works by black authors were “dark matter,” invisible to the eye and unknown. And, yes, I was sometimes tempted to condemn the white teachers and professors I had since the 1950s for not placing this history, this art, this literature before me. But I realize now that *they* had not been taught or exposed to any of this, and therefore had nothing of this sort to transmit to the children of color who filled their classes when *Brown v Board of Education* went into effect after 1954. So in the 1960s and earlier, a black student had to be an autodidact, someone who became skillful at doing research on his own and teaching himself what our schools did not offer.

When educating oneself, when struggling against the intentional and unintentional gaps in the larger culture's curricula and canon, one cannot just pick oneself up by one's bootstraps either, since the student is of course escaping the decade by tapping into the centuries. It must be emphasized: the importance of an expansive consciousness that sees the work of our predecessors from all corners of the world—all their attempts to conjure sense from experience—is part of our rich, human inheritance. It was not a garish, psychedelic fad of the 1960s. Almost two hundred years ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his journal of 1845 that “Every history in the world is my history. I can as readily see myself in the Vedas as in the New Testament, in Aesop as in the Cambridge Platform or the Declaration of Independence.” And the America that Emerson envisioned so long ago was also, he said, “—an asylum of all nations, the energy of Irish, Germans, Swedes, Poles, & Cossacks, & all the European tribes,—of the Africans, & of the Polynesians, (who) will construct a new race, a new religion, a new State, a new literature, which will be as vigorous as the new Europe which came out of the smelting pot of the Dark Ages . . .”

Emerson saw no one as being a stranger, and nothing in the human experience as being alien or foreign to him, which brings to mind a line I read recently: Zen is intimacy with all things. Everywhere in his Transcendentalist writings and speeches, we come across Emerson's absolute certainty that he *is* the Other. That the divisions we have erected between races, genders, religions, and classes are simply, as Francis Bacon would say, Idols of the Tribe. In a moment, I will have a little more to say about other Idols of the Cave as they relate to art and scholarship.

If Emerson significantly begins our cultural discussion of Self and Other in the nineteenth century, the late writer named after him, Ralph Waldo Ellison, advances and deepens that project in the twentieth. In the 1940s, when he wrote his masterpiece *Invisible Man*, Ellison says what he discovered is that “by a trick of fate (and our racial problems notwithstanding), *the human imagination is integrative—and the same is true of the centrifugal force that inspirits the democratic process.*” The African-born philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who was trained at Cambridge and now teaches at Princeton, has his own way of expressing this most fundamental of truths. In his important book *In My Father's House*, Appiah says, “We are all already contaminated by each other.” This mutual contamination, or creolization—or can we say cross-fertilization?—is something Ellison and Appiah and *all* people of color are obliged to learn quite early in childhood, if they are minorities. And, in the language of Thich Nhat Hahn, a Vietnamese Buddhist teacher who has been tremendously influential on a number of American writers, the realization of “interbeing” is the most direct path to understand—in order to end—all manner of suffering, including the pain and harm caused by racism.

Interbeing requires that we engage the world rather than escape it. The realization of interbeing requires more of us than would the substitution of one canon of literature or one system of value for another. Besides, ignoring previous ways of thinking is not a realistic option. When I went to school in the 1950s, I knew it was incumbent upon black students to understand the white humanities curriculum and its assumptions as well as the white students in class beside me, approaching with openness and humility (and sometimes clenched teeth) all those works composed *by* whites and *for* whites but with people of color never part of the author-audience equation. We had to learn to momentarily identify with the themes, figures, and tropes of the racial Other, although this momentary identification was further complicated since it would make no sense for a developing black student to permanently internalize a racist value system. Without abandoning critical consciousness, one had to absorb the products of the Greek and the Judaic, the Roman, French, and British, to emotionally empathize and project themselves *behind* the eyes of

whites as diverse as Homer, the Beowulf poet, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoyevsky, Virginia Woolf, and Sylvia Plath.

For children of color, this understanding of the racial Other in the sense that Emerson imagined in his journals is always a matter of survival; they have to know how to carefully and critically “read” American society from at least two perspectives, from the perspective of how these products are given to whites (by whites), and also from the perspective, marginalized and often “invisible,” of black history and experience. A Czech proverb captures this nicely: “You live a new life for every language you learn,” as does a saying by Charlemagne: “To know another language is to have a second soul.” Substitute “culture” for “language” (which is one of the defining constituents of culture), and it’s clear that every immigrant of color understands what it means to live this dual, profoundly integrationist position in a Eurocentric society, whether he is living in Los Angeles, Paris, Berlin, Amsterdam, or Brussels.

To imagine the Other requires not one but multiple educations, and so the black student (and anyone else who would avoid being stunted by the vested interests of a given social structure) needs to learn, even from the elementary grades, to read phenomenon from a multicultural standpoint. In addition to what the standard curriculum offers, the black student must acquire knowledge of the enormous contributions African-Americans have made to this country since the time of the seventeenth century colonies, and they have had to assimilate knowledge received from other black people and from unrecorded stories transmitted by family members and friends, which only recently entered into our history books and into mainstream media. This utterly practical and necessary lesson in interbeing was hardly limited to the world of libraries and coffee shops, as the black student in the 1950s—and anyone in a marginal position today—had to learn all about the relative and conditional cultural formations of the world-as-it-is. In my case, this was a WASP society that valued white cultural contributions and tended (and tends) to discount black cultural contributions. Intimate knowledge of the white Other was necessary for navigating successfully through America’s institutions—schools, jobs, social situations, etc. Zen is “intimacy with all things,” though I do not believe this is acceptance of all things.

Buddhism has interested writers in part because it dramatizes and universalizes the individual’s journey toward completion, but one of the most striking modern trends within Buddhism has included a movement outward, toward social responsibility. Recent work on “Engaged Buddhism” includes Sallie King’s *Being Benevolence*—but what has literary art got to do with this important movement? The best writers have had their own

terminology to indicate the ineffable totality that Thich Nhat Hanh called “interbeing.” Allen Ginsberg favored Keats’ “negative capability.” I prefer “Aleph-consciousness,” which was called to my attention by Seattle writer Kathleen Alcalá. The term Aleph-consciousness derives from a short story by Jorge Luis Borges called “The Aleph,” in which he describes the *aleph* as “the place where . . . all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist.” It is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and of its shape Borges says that it “is that of a man pointing to the sky and the earth, to indicate that the lower world is the map and mirror of the higher.” (Buddha’s “one-finger dharma” may come to mind here, as well.) From its vantage point, Borges says, one can see “simultaneous night and day.” Historically, black Americans, Asians, and Hispanics had to develop this epistemic skill, and doing so required a lot of work for an entire lifetime. Let me give you an example for how one great American writer, not a Buddhist, developed a nuanced, polyvalent Aleph-consciousness.

In *Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius*, literary critic Lawrence Jackson relates an incident at Tuskegee Institute, which proved to be crucial for Ellison’s development and is useful for our purposes here. “The most significant discovery of 1935 for Ellison,” says Jackson, “was T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*. . . . with a prodigious expenditure of energy, Ellison stepped-up his reading in order to nail down the poem’s meaning. He looked up Eliot’s seven pages of references, with Professor Sprague’s collegial advice informing his search, and began to unpack the layers of the poem . . . The library explorations took him into new territories of geography and anthropology. Ellison began with Jessie Wetson’s [sic] *From Ritual to Romance*, nearly a guidebook to ‘elucidate the difficulties of the poem’. Wetson [sic] revealed the Arthurian legend and fisher-king myths directly behind Eliot’s poem. George Frazier’s multivolumed *The Golden Bough* provided him with an overview of human ritual and culture. Ellison revived his dusty Latin skills, drilled into him at Douglass High School in Oklahoma in order to understand a generous Ovid quote, which Eliot found indispensable, as well as the smattering of French he’d obtained in the fall. The exhausting research netted him intimacy with many of the major canonical Western texts that were not staples in the Tuskegee curriculum, such as *The Aeneid*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, *The Inferno*, Spenser’s *Prothalamion*, *Paradise Lost*, the *Tempest* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. In the weeks following the historical education in literature and anthropology, he came to the work of Ford Madox Ford, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein and more Hemingway. . . .”

In other words, Ellison’s education demanded of him that he intimately know jazz and the sources for all the references in Eliot’s poem; black history

and St. Augustine's *Confessions*; the works of the Harlem Renaissance and Sherwood Anderson—what a Eurocentric curriculum provided and what it deliberately censored at the time. It required a certain generosity of spirit, because this approach to learning is conjunctive, not disjunctive; not “either/or” but rather “this-and-this-and this-and, of course, *that* too.” For Ellison understood, like King and Emerson, that everything in life and culture is interrelated and interconnected—the black, the white, the Western, the Eastern, *connected*, as King said, “in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.” This idea of creolization is also central to Buddhist thought and is expressed by the truth of dependent origination (*pratitya samutpada*), which says that nothing comes into existence independently, that all things in this universe depend on all other things for their being. And art is marked throughout by dependent origination, interbeing, and, just as necessarily, multiculturalism. The first images of Buddha were carved by craftsmen of Greek descent, left behind in Gandara after Alexander the Great's march through India.

Against the common misunderstanding in which Buddhism is a nihilistic erasure of the social world, we might consider that Buddhism is a religion dedicated to creative reconstruction. In Michael Ondaatje's fine novel *Anil's Ghost*, the war-ravaged stone-worker Ananda restores a broken Buddha, and perhaps one day the broken Buddhas of Bamiyan will be reassembled creatively. The essays in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* do not celebrate the rejection of a social world but rather its reconstruction, a reordering of its parts in line with its best potentialities. At this point, I must add that every young black artist in America or the 1960s (or the 1860s, or the 1760s), necessarily faced a world very much in need of imaginative reconstruction. African-American artists in the decades since have insistently pointed out just how much of the history and experience of their families and ancestors have been erased, elided, or rendered “invisible” by the dominant society; they also came to understand, on the deepest levels of their lives, that as artists they had important, *personal* duties to fulfill. To make visible the invisible. To disclose through artistic creation all those things that had been deliberately concealed, wiped away in our schools, in our popular entertainment, and in the national consciousness—for example, the experience of the slave trade, what exactly it was like to be on those ships that sailed with black cargo for 300 years. In my era, a young black artist or scholar discovered a crucial part of his work involved restoring meaning lost in American history, and pursuing with a sense of adventure the exploration of new meaning after the era of segregation ended. I wanted to explain to the nice man who questioned me after my “Storytelling and

the Alpha Narrative” lecture that a project—a passion—such as this is not something the artist chooses. Rather, the *duty* may be unavoidable to any artist who picks up a brush or a pen. Any artist who is sensitive to such a duty understands that art can never have the luxury of being just “entertainment” or a form of escapism. On the contrary, it must be a probing of reality, because art has a phenomenological duty to perform, the duty of disclosure, and not just for black Americans, but for all human kind as *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* amply demonstrates. Such a personal passion, once discovered, electrifies the artist’s and scholar’s imagination and interest in almost every field known to man—he is driven to find the remnants of himself and his ancestors, who are hidden just off to one side of the official historical record; he finds himself in the sciences, for example, in the work of geneticists who, when they add up the tiny genetic variations that make one person different from the next, discover there are more differences within so-called races than between them. In other words, he finds himself, his possibilities, in all the arts and sciences.

## II.

To think of the arts and sciences properly, then, is to understand that all our perspectives, all the disciplines we pursue, take us directly to a common situation, a common history from which all meanings evolve. As phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty writes in *Adventures of the Dialectic*:

My own field of thought and action is made up of imperfect meanings, badly defined and interrupted. They are completed over there, in the others who hold the key to them because they see sides of things that I do not see, as well as, one might say, my social back. Likewise, I am the only one capable of tallying the balance sheets of their lives, for their meanings are also incomplete and are openings onto something that I alone am able to see. I do not have to search very far for the others: I find them in my experience, lodged in the hollows that show what they see and what I fail to see. Our experiences thus have lateral relationships of truth: all together, each possessing what is secret to the other, in our combined functionings we form a totality which moves toward enlightenment and completion. . . . We are never locked in ourselves.

I like to believe that this is what novelist John Fowles meant when he coined the phrase, “whole sight.” It is what I initially found in the world’s visual arts. When confronted by art, we can never be “locked in ourselves.” Art is the bridge to the Other, from one subjectivity to another, and so the experience of art is, if not universal, then at least inter-subjective—and that is the

best we can hope for in either the arts or the sciences. Art has an epistemological mission, and a profound contempt for cultural provincialism; but besides being a pathway to knowledge and a correction for calcified ways of seeing, art does something more.

A lifetime devoted to one or several of the arts leads to a profound sense of humility and thanksgiving. When I was kid, I had only one burning passion: art. Initially, nothing else interested me. I *only* wanted to create. But like a thread one pulls on, say, from a sweater, that single passion to create and clarify, first for oneself and hopefully for others, leads (in an interconnected universe) to all that one sees it is interwoven with, to a deepening interest in the creations of other artists, their biographies, and to related art forms. I don't know if this sounds like a strange idea to you. Today the public has the popular conception that writers and artists merely emote and "express" their feelings. The general public also seems to believe that what they see in a book spilled from the writer in finished form as a first draft. I'm sure those of us here know that for every page a writer saves, he often throws out twenty. There is a lovely little book called *The Educated Imagination* by critic Northrop Frye; which I've had my students read for the last thirty years, and I suggest you read it, too. I give it to my apprentice writers because it is funny and humbling and wise. For example, Frye says, "It's not surprising if writers are often rather simple people, not always what we think of as intellectuals, and certainly not always any freer of silliness or perversity than anyone else. What concerns us is what they produce, not what they are, and poetry, according to Milton, who ought to have known, is 'more simple, sensuous and passionate' than philosophy or science."

Frye also says that "A writer's desire to write can only have come from previous experience of literature, and he'll start by imitating whatever he's read, which usually means what the people around him are writing. This provides him with what is called a convention, a certain typical and socially accepted way of writing." This description by Frye of how the writer begins has always struck me as accurate, but I would beg to differ with his quote from Milton. The kind of writer I'm talking about, one who is truly passionately driven by the desire for Whole Sight, is not comfortable with placing different disciplines like philosophy and poetry and history in little boxes, or with the creation of artificial barriers between them. I've always seen this as a form of segregation, what I call creative and intellectual apartheid. To a great degree, such divisions are also Idols of the Cave in which our education and relative cultural conditioning cause us to fail to see the interconnectedness of all human efforts to make sense of the world. Rather, when we remember that Plato chose the dialogue, a dramatic form,

to express his ideas, we recognize that these two fields, literature and philosophy, are sister disciplines.

History is also of acute interest to writers of literary fiction. What is history but the telling of stories? Journalism has often been called the “first draft of history.” The twentieth draft is perhaps a fine work of historical scholarship like Stephen Oates’s *Let the Trumpet Sound*, a book I relied heavily on when I spent seven years writing my last novel, *Dreamer*, [about the final two years in the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.] Stephen Oates was very kind to me when I met him at Amherst College in 1998, where he teaches. He had me sign a copy of the novel for him and said it was the best book on King he’d ever read. I think he was being nice when he said that. But I *know* he was being honest when he said that working on his biography of King, felt like working with one hand tied behind my back. He wasn’t able to imaginatively interpret the wealth of research he had gathered in the way that a novelist could. He told me he was experimenting in his historical work with some of the narrative devices and dramatic strategies that he appreciated in fiction. Just as Professor Oates borrows from the tool kit of the novelist, so too will the novelist appropriate some of the concerns of the historian.

The artist who practices Whole Sight, the one haunted by a “single desire,” an overwhelming love, will—as Frye says—learn from the conventions of his particular moment in cultural history. But he (or she) will go beyond that. Specifically, he will, like an archaeologist, look toward the past as he contemplates the future of his field. If he is a writer of novels or short stories, his love of these forms naturally drives him to analyze and take apart the major works in these two genres, as Ellison did with Eliot, to study the biographies of the men and women who produced stories and novels that advanced the evolution of these forms, from their beginnings in eighteenth-century works like Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, in the case of the novel; and, in the case of short fiction, from Edgar Allan Poe’s invention of the modern short story and his theorizing about it in essays like “On the Aim and Technique of the Short Story,” to the degeneration of the form into a formula by the early 1900s, and the revolt by short story writers like D. H. Lawrence and Sherwood Anderson against this formalism in the 1920s. In other words, the *love* of fiction drives an artist to understand as deeply as he can the theory and practice of his predecessors so that he can know—at his own moment in history—what new works are called for to promote the evolution of his craft.

Out of his enthusiasm for art comes a love of the achievements of others, and out of *that* there arises the natural movement of the artist from his

workshop to the classroom, to a desire to teach and, in my case during the last 36 years, to more than 300 lecture podiums. Why? Well, the best way to polish and hone one's craft is to teach it, and one of life's great pleasures is sharing what one loves and has learned with others.

If that Emersonian and Ellisonian passion leads the artist to realizing he must also become a literary critic—someone who can take the temperature of art produced in his own time and evaluate the significance of art from the past—then this “single desire” Easwaran spoke of also effloresces into an appreciation of Eastern and Western philosophy, especially aesthetics or theories of art. When I was eighteen years old, a professional cartoonist and journalism major, I knew nothing of philosophy. But at the school I attended, all journalism majors had to take two required courses in philosophy. One was logic, which my wise teachers at the time knew was a very good thing for a journalist to know something about. The other course I took my first year in college was a huge lecture course on the philosophy of the pre-Socratics, taught by a young professor named John Howie. Somehow (I don't know how) and with some gift he had (I don't know what), Dr. Howie was able to sing the 2,000-year-old ethical problems confronting Heraclitus and Parmenides in such a way that I realized for the first time that many of the social issues I was publishing drawings about in the late 1960s were problems debated and discussed with sophistication more than two millennia before the birth of the American republic. He made me see that the questions we ask determine the quality of the answers we get. Sitting in a sea of students in Dr. Howie's class, I realized that my passion for art demanded a lifelong passion for philosophy as well.

Everything in the “well-spent” career of an artist flows from one original seed, one passion “carried through to the very end.” The roots of the tree is the desire for art. As that seed flowers, producing *new* passions, branching out the artist's body of work into essays, aesthetic manifestos, cultural criticism, and other dramatic forms such as screenplays, and appreciations of the artists and scholars on whose shoulders he stands, it also produces, as you might guess, a love of language that shows us the possibilities of the English tongue, and equally a love of foreign languages, too. Such a literary artist may love language so much that he reads the entire *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* with his magnifying-glass in hand, as my own teacher John Gardner once did, and as I did when I was a graduate student and went through every word in the 2,129-page unabridged *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*. (That chore I gave myself when I was twenty-five took six months to complete.)

And I never dreamed in my youth that I'd now be in my ninth year of Sanskrit study. Foreign languages were never my forte, and I've forgotten

almost all the French and Spanish I once knew. But a love of art in general led me in my teens to Eastern art. I studied over and over the “10 Oxherding Pictures” of twelfth-century Zen artist Kaku-an Shi-en (popularized by D.T. Suzuki) and other Asian artworks as if they were the visual equivalent of a mantra. In Liang K’ai’s thirteenth-century sketch *The Sixth Patriarch Tears up a Sutra*, I saw a spontaneity in his brush strokes that seemed analogous to the sudden, instantaneous experience of satori favored by Ch’an (Zen) Buddhists. In Ma Yüan’s *Landscape in Moonlight* (A.D. 1200) and Kao K’o-kung’s *Landscape after Rain* (A.D. 1250–1300), my eyes moved over paintings that gently nudged me into new ways of seeing. Ephemeral cliffs and mountain peaks were forms briefly manifest from a fecund emptiness (*shunyata*) that, mysteriously, was also a plentitude of being. Such forms arose (trees, clouds, people), were captured on silk, but were ever on the verge of vanishing back into the Undifferentiated, the Non-Dual, leaving no trace of themselves, like waves on water. Both works were fine examples of how the “beautiful” was attained in Buddhist art: namely, by dissolving the false distinction or duality between the beautiful and the ugly—it was the realm *before* their ontological and epistemological separation (by mind, by language) and obscuring by relativity that I was seeing in Eastern art.

So a passion for art based on the dharma led me to first practice meditation when I was fourteen years old; to write the novel *Oxherding Tale* when I was in my twenties; and to embrace the life of a lay Buddhist, an *upasaka*, in my thirties. And *that* passion segued into the joy that comes from translating works that have meant so much to me for forty years—Theravada and Mahayana sutras, large portions of the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the Advaita Vedanta classic *Astāvakra Samhitā*—and seeing how many credible translations and interpretations are possible for a single *sloka* (or verse) of four lines, eight syllables each. The same is true of my hunger for science now. Just *one* great love—art—it seems to me, opens one up to the entire vast world of human experience. During this long journey, the Aleph-consciousness, the soul, of the artist becomes enriched and expansive. As Ellison once said, the work of art is “the completion of personality.” During the fifteen years I was privileged to know the late playwright August Wilson, the novelist John Gardner for ten years, and Seattle painters Jacob Lawrence and Gwen Knight, I saw as soon as we met that it was this “single desire” around which they structured their daily lives for decades.

And what one discovers after such a creative and critical passage is just how little we know. The limits of knowing always give us a healthy sense of humility. We see that in the 4.5-billion-year history of the earth, modern humans have only been around for between 100 and 200,000 years, the mere blink of an eye in a universe that is about 13.5-billion-years-old.

Cosmologists say dark matter and dark energy, which was discovered only nine years ago, make up 96 percent of the universe; what we can see and measure accounts for only four percent.

In other words, we find ourselves living in the midst of a great mystery, so the very idea of “Whole Sight” in the arts and sciences can only be an ever-receding ideal, like the horizon, something we strive for with awareness that our knowledge is always partial, incomplete, and provisional. As Bertrand Russell observed, what we know is always “vanishing small.”

Art, then, is a daily reminder of this mystery. Obviously, the mystery is us. After I complete each new story, essay, or lecture, I both marvel and am thankful for the strangeness and beauty of a bottomless passion that cuts across so many related disciplines. And sometimes, late at night, around 5 AM when I’m finishing a new piece, I remember the famous Chinese poem by P’ang-yun:

*How wonderful, how marvelous!!  
I fetch wood, I carry water!*

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## INDEX

- affirmative action, 212–14, 216, 226
- Aitken, Robert, 15, 124, 128–29, 133, 135, 139, 151; *Encouraging Words: Zen Buddhist Teachings for Western Students*, 124
- Allen, Donald, 105, 118, 122, 146;
- Anderson, Benedict, 3
- American Buddhism, 2, 4–9, 16, 64, 126–27, 136, 155, 179, 180, 185
- Far Eastern sources of: Chinese, 38, 42, 43, 46, 53; Japanese, 31, 39, 41, 42, 86; Japanese “New Buddhism,” 26–28, 31; Kegon Buddhism, 25–26, 32–34, 36, 37, 39, 111; Mahayana Buddhism, 8, 9, 30, 53, 57, 71, 78, 84, 111, 153, 156–57, 164, 195, 199–200, 206, 208, 218, 226; Tendai Buddhism (Tiantai in China), 21, 26, 29–36, 38; Zen, 5, 45, 49, 51, 53, 57, 69, 103, 106, 116–17, 118, 119, 121, 124, 126–27, 132, 133, 135, 136, 141–42, 225, 228, 241; (Japanese), 53, 157, 218; (Chinese), 45, 51, 57
- Himalayan sources of: Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism) 4, 6, 8, 12–13, 16, 17, 63, 68–71, 84–90, 92, 98, 140, 155–74; 218; Vajrayana, Nyingma lineage, 64, 67, 69, 75, 78, 80, 81, 155, 157; Vajrayana, Karma Kagyu lineage, 87, 93, 155, 157
- South and Southeast Asian sources of: Theravada (sometimes called Hinayana) Buddhism, 31, 157, 241; Vietnamese, ix, 190–193–95, 197, 199, 201, 233
- Anderson, Hans Christian, 179
- Anderson, Sherwood, 239
- anthropocentrism, 12, 146–47, 149; Judeo-Christian creation myths and, 146–47
- Antin, David, 142
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony, *In My Father’s House*, 233
- Artaud, Antonin, 66
- Augustine, Jane, 7, 12, 15
- Bacon, Francis, 233
- Baker, Richard, 113, 115–16, 119n25, 120n29
- Baraka, Imamu Amiri, 140
- Bartlett, Lee, 54, 59, 104, 118
- Bashō, 90–92, 94–97; *Back Roads to Far Countries*, 94
- Bataille, Georges, 66, 78, 80

- Beats, the, 1, 2, 12–13, 45, 52, 66–67, 69, 78, 81, 93, 103, 116, 117, 119, 121, 123, 125, 127–29, 133–36, 140–42; 163, 177–78, 230–31, 243; “Women Writers of the Beat Generation,” 127, 129
- Belgrad, Daniel, 127
- Benamou, Michael, 139
- Beneath a Single Moon*, 80, 94, 98, 120, 122, 179 (see also Johnson, Kent)
- Berrigan, Ted, 140
- Bhagavad-Gita*, 241
- Bhikku Bodhi, 231
- Bhikku Thanissaro, 7, 17
- Blake, William, 130–32, 141, 158
- Blofield, John, 55
- Blyth, R. H., 91, 105, 109, 118, 119, 121
- Bokenkamp, Stephen R., 48, 58, 59
- Borges, Jorge Luis, 235
- Breton, André, 66, 164; “L’Union libre,” 164
- Buddha (the historical Buddha: Siddhārtha Gautama, Sanskrit; Siddhattha Gotama, Pali; c. 563 BCE to 483 BCE), ix, 4, 30, 33, 75, 104, 201, 213, 219
- Buddhism:
- and cultural movements: Asian American literature and, 179, 201, 204–205; avant-garde and, 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 64, 66, 70–71, 75–76, 79, 103–104, 116, 127, 142; Beats poets and, 2, 49, 66, 69, 103–17, 123–35, 133, 140–41, 177–72, 230; haiku and, 90, 91, 93, 103, 105, 108–109, 115, 117; 118–19, 121, 135; Imagism and, 85, 92–94; LANGUAGE poets, the, 12, 142; performance poetry and theory, 11, 76, 164–67; Surrealism and, 66, 77, 163–64, 169
  - and politics: the Cold War and, 15–16, 178; Deep Ecology and, 4, 52–56, 140, 146, 148–49, 153, 154; democracy and, 233; Vietnam War and, ix, 9, 13–14, 71, 111, 155, 157, 186–87, 189–206, 233
  - and sexuality: sexual desire and, 1, 16, 120, 133, 154, 160–62; the divine feminine and, 164–66; feminism and, 2, 153, 164–66, 171, 183, 218, 225; homosexuality and, 2, 6, 64, 68, 72–74, 80
  - and other religions: Confucianism, 13, 25–27, 50, 59, 93, 178–180, 197–99; Christianity, 9, 16, 28, 31, 39, 74, 105, 140, 141, 146–48, 151–54, 169, 178–80, 206, 220–21, 227; Islam (Sufism), 66, 76; Judaism, 146–48, 158; Hinduism, 66, 187; syncretic religion, 40, 168, 179–81, 190, 197–99
  - and nihilism: 29, 77, 91, 129, 186, 236
  - and sutras and sacred texts of: Avatamsaka Sutra (Flower Ornament Sutra), 33, 39, 40, 105, 111; Gandavyuha Sutra, 167, 173; Prajnaparamita Sutra (Heart Sutra), 39, 107; Lankavatara Sutra, 110–11, 119, 167; Lotus Sutra (Saddharma Pundarika Sutra), 225; Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch (*Dankyo*, Treasure of Law), 39
  - and central concepts: *anatta* (no-self), 164, 182; Indra’s Net, 25, 33–34, 37, 39, 105, 113, 118; interbeing, 233–36; *karma*, 13–14, 71, 167, 189–205, 206, 219, 220; *mahamudra*, 92, 99, 158, 172, 174; Middle Way, 29–34; 38, 78, 80, 195; non-duality, 53–54, 112, 114, 124, 150, 157, 241; *prajna* (discriminating awareness), 89, 107, 171; rebirth, 29, 110, 191–92;

- reincarnation, 152, 190, 198, 201, 203, 205, 219; *samsara*, 3, 96, 159, 171, 208, 210, 222; *sangha*, ix, 23, 29, 145, 156, 185; *upaya* (compassion), 3, 7, 22, 53, 73, 76, 84, 160, 210, 219, 220, 227
- Bui, Ngoc H., 191, 205
- Burroughs, William S., 3, 7, 8, 17, 67–69, 76–79
- Cage, John, 66, 71
- Cao Lan, *Monkey Bridge*, 13, 189–205
- Capra, Fritjof, *The Tao of Physics*, 139
- Cassady, Carolyn, 126, 129
- Cassady, Neal, 126, 130, 134
- Cayce, Edgar, 126
- Cézanne, Paul, 8, 85–87
- Chappell, David, 199, 206
- Charters, Ann, 125, 127, 136, 137; “Women Writers of the Beat Generation,” 127, 129
- Chatral Rinpoche, 69
- Chisolm, Lawrence, 30, 38
- Christopher, Renny, 194, 206
- Clark, Amy, 177–78
- Clark, Tom, 8, 16, 209; *Naropa Poetry Wars*, 8
- co-emerging (see dependent arising)
- Cold Mountain (person, see Han Shan)
- Cold Mountain (place) 45–57, 178
- Coleman, James William, 13, 17
- Colonialism and postcolonialism, 27–29, 39, 42, 190, 206, 210, 226, 227, 228, 234
- conditioned arising (see dependent arising)
- Confucianism, 25, 26, 50, 93, 178, 197–99; syncretic religion and, 179–81, 197–99
- Corman, Cid, *Origin*, 94
- counter-culture, 2, 52, 57, 106, 116, 127, 140, 142, 146;
- Creeley, Robert, 85, 173
- Cunningham, Merce, 85
- Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)*, 7, 51, 54,
- Daoism (Taoism), 25, 27, 42, 45, 47–48, 50–51, 56, 58, 66, 92, 106, 139, 142, 144, 147, 151, 153, 178–81
- Daumal, René, 66, 78, 80
- Dauids, Rhys, 30
- Davidson, Michael, 2, 17, 118, 121
- Death and Fame*, 133–134, 136, 173 (see also Ginsberg, Allen)
- Deep Ecology, 4, 12, 140, 146, 148–49
- Defoe, Daniel, *Robinson Crusoe*, 239
- dependent arising, 26, 32–34, 36, 72–73, 53–54, 105, 107, 109–12, 114, 116, 132, 151, 169, 182, 206, 220–23, 236–38
- dependent co-origination (see dependent arising)
- Derrida, Jacques, 11, 23, 37, 40, 151–53, 184
- detachment, 9, 46, 56, 212
- dharma transmission, 113, 119, 120
- dharma, ix, 9, 14, 23, 87, 88, 96–97, 113, 156, 178, 185, 241
- di Prima, Diane, 7, 10, 111
- Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, 69
- Dirlik, Arif, 201, 206
- Dōgen Eihei, 15, 17, 113, 120, 142–143
- Dovido, John, 213
- Drengson, Alan, 148; ecophilosophy, 148–149, 154
- Duchamp, Marcel, 77
- Dudjom Rinpoche (H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche), 64, 67, 69, 75, 77
- dukkha*, 209
- Duncan, Robert, 85, 151
- Easwaran, Eknath, 229
- ecotheology, 11, 12, 140, 146–49, 152–53
- Eliot, T.S., 66, 98, 235, 239; *The Waste Land*, 235
- Ellison, Ralph Waldo, 233, 235–36, 239–241; *Invisible Man*, 233

- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 23–24, 232–34, 236, 240; see also Transcendentalism
- Empson, William, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, 115
- emptiness (see *sunyata*)
- Engaged Buddhism, 9, 14, 224, 227, 234
- enlightenment, 10, 33, 56, 91, 107, 110–11, 124, 129–30, 145, 167, 171, 210, 217, 231, 241
- environmentalism, 52, 53, 141, 144, 146–49, 152, 153, 154; Gary Snyder and, 53–56; nature writing, 52
- Epstein, Mark, 14, 17
- ethnopoetics, 4, 11, 139
- Evans-Wentz, W. Y., 67, 79, 80
- Evergreen Review*, 45
- Faas, Ekbert, 132, 136
- Fenollosa, Ernest, 4, 5, 7, 15, 21–41, 93, 97; “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” 21–36, 93; *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art*, 31
- Fields, Rick, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 93, 133
- Fischer, Norman, 92
- Foucault, Michel, 5
- Fowles, John, 237
- Frazier, George, *Golden Bough, The*, 235
- Frye, Northrop, 238–39
- Gampopa, 87–88, 92–93, 98, 171, 173
- Gandara, 236
- Gardner, John, 240–41
- Garfield, Jay L., 39, 41, 80, 198, 206
- Giamo, Ben, 125, 136
- Ginsberg, Allen, 1, 2, 7, 9–12, 15, 17, 67, 69, 83–84, 89, 93, 103–104, 117, 118, 119, 121, 122, 123–36, 140–41, 155–74, 178, 224, 235; *Allen Verbatim*, 131, 135; “Negative Capability: Kerouac’s Buddhist Ethic,” 133; *Death and Fame*, 133–134, 136, 173; *Howl*, 67, 160, 161, 162
- Giorno, John, 4, 6, 7, 16, 63–81, 224; *Poems*, 67, 69; *Cancer in My Left Ball*, 6, 64, 69–73; *Shit Piss Blood Pus and Brains*, 6, 64; *Balling Buddha*, 6, 68–70; *Grasping at Emptiness*, 64; *You Got to Burn to Shine*, 67; *The American Book of the Dear*, 67; Giorno Poetry Systems, 64; Electronic Sensory Poetic Environments, 68; “Dial A Poem,” 68
- Guenther, Herbert V., 8, 84–85, 87–88, 92; *The Dawn of Tantra*, 8, 85; *The Tantric View of Life*, 84, 92; translation of Gampopa’s *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, 87, 171; *The Royal Song of Saraha*, 84–85
- Gysin, Brion, 67–69, 76–77
- Hall, Stuart, 195
- Han Shan, 5, 45–60; and Chinese Zen Buddhism, 45–46; Lu Ch’iu-Yin’s preface to the poems, 47
- Han Yueh-fu*, 49, 58
- Harvey, Peter, 215–16, 227
- Hayslip, Le Ly, 194
- Hegel, G. W. F., 21–23, 24, 27, 29–30, 38, 148
- Heidegger, Martin, 6, 86, 94–96, 98; “dis-closure,” 86, 90; *On the Way to Thinking*, 94; “The Nature of Language,” 95
- Heller, Michael, 4, 6–8, 12, 15, 83–99
- Henricks, Robert G., 5, 45, 47, 49, 50, 52, 53, 58, 59, 61, 62
- Hershock, Peter D., 198, 203, 206
- Hinduism, 66, 187
- Ho Chi Minh, 197
- Ho-Ka (see Schwerner, Armand)
- Hölderlin, Friedrich, 95–96
- Howie, John, 240
- Howl*, 67, 160, 161, 162 (see also Ginsberg, Allen)
- Hsien-chuan Shih-i*, 47
- Huang Yunte, 25, 41

- Huayan Buddhism (or Huayen; see American Buddhism, Far Eastern sources of)
- Hulme, T. E., 94
- Husserl, Edmund, 86
- I Ching*, 71
- Imagism, 85, 92–94;
- Indra's Net, 25, 33–34, 105
- Inoue, Enryō, 27, 29–31, 38, 39, 41, 42
- interbeing (see Thich Nhat Hahn)
- Jackson, Lawrence, 235
- Janette, Michelle, 192, 194
- Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, 171
- Jia Jinhua, 48, 59
- Johns, Jasper, 67, 77
- Johnson, Charles, 13, 15, 207–24; *Dr. King's Refrigerator and Other Stories*, 14, 207–24; *Turning the Wheel: Essays in Buddhism and Writing*, 14, 207–28; *Dreamer*, 239; Aleph-consciousness, 235, 241
- Johnson, Joyce, 129
- Johnson, Kent, 5, 94, 98, 120n31, 122
- Jones, Hettie, 1, 127
- Jowett, Deborah, 166
- Kahn, Douglas, 76, 79, 80
- Kahn, Paul, 55, 57, 59
- Kaku-an Shi-en (Kuo-an Shih-yuan), "Ten Oxherding Pictures," 241
- Kanaseki Hisao, 57
- Kangyur Rinpoche, 69
- Kanō Hōgai, 21
- Kao K'o-kung, 241; *Landscape after Rain*, 241
- karma, 13–14, 71, 167, 189–205, 219; Vietnamese Buddhist conception of, 191
- Karmapa XVI (Rikpe Dorje), 155
- Kaza, Stephanie, 196, 206
- Keats, John, "negative capability," 235
- Kegon Buddhism (see American Buddhism, Far Eastern sources of)
- Kennedy, George A., 23, 41
- Kenner, Hugh, 23–24, 41
- Keown, Damian, 203, 206, 227
- Kern, Robert, 24, 57, 60
- Kerouac, Jack, 2, 9, 10, 11, 15, 103, 123–35, 177; *The Dharma Bums*, 126; *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, 128; *On the Road*, 130; *Satori in Paris*, 130
- Kim Phuc, 193, 205
- Kim, Elaine, 204
- King, Sallie B., 196, 206, 234; "Being Benevolence," 234
- King, Stephen, 184
- Kingston, Earll, 177, 180, 186–87
- Kingston, Maxine Hong, ix-xi, 13, 15, 17, 177–88; *The Woman Warrior*, 3, 13, 182–84; *Tripmaster Monkey*, 13, 181, 184, 186; *The Fifth Book of Peace*, 13, 182–84, 186; *China Men*, 183–84
- Knight, Gwen, 241
- kōan*, 6, 10, 104, 108–10, 112, 113, 116, 118, 119, 120, 121, 124, 134, 136, 143, 149, 211, 224; *Zenrinkushu*, 109; *Mumonkan (Gateless Gate)*, 109; *Hekigan roku*, 112
- Koontz, Dean, 209
- Kornfield, Jack, 227
- Kostelanetz, Richard, 64, 77, 80
- Kraus, Lisa, 166, 173
- Kyger, Joanne, 69, 181–82
- Lacan, Jacques, 10
- LANGUAGE poets, the, 142
- Lao-zi (Lao Tzu), *Dao De Jin*, 142
- Lardas, John, 15–16, 17, 125, 125; *The Bop Apocalypse*, 125
- Lautréamont, Comte de (Isidore Lucien Ducasse), 71
- Lawrence, D. H., 239
- Lawrence, Jacob, 241
- Leary, Timothy, 67, 78

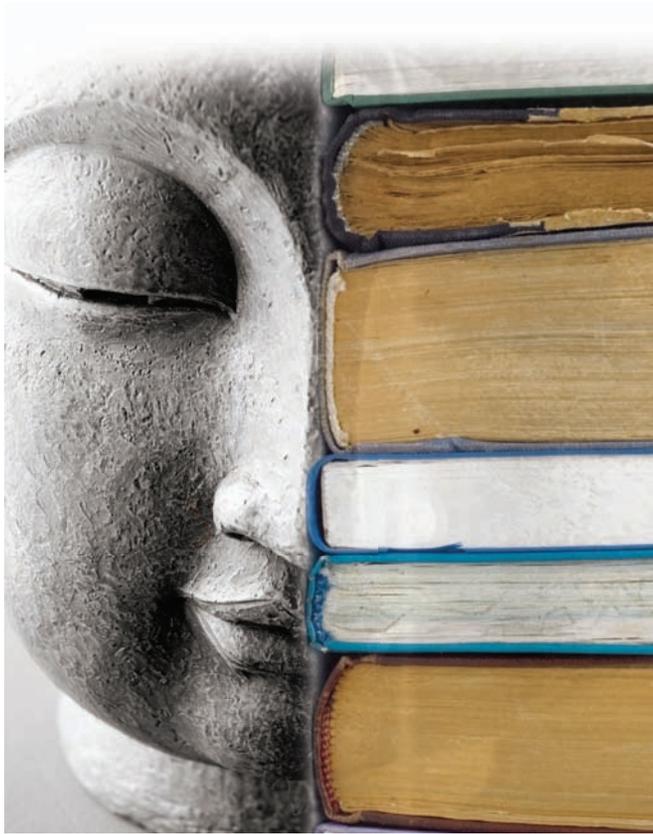
- Liang K'ai, *The Sixth Patriarch Tears up a Sutra*, 241
- liberation theology, 220
- Ling Chung, 46, 57
- Little, Jonathan, 207, 217
- Lolita*, 1
- Lowell, Amy, 94
- Lu Ch'iu-Yin, 47
- Lyon, Thomas J., 46
- Ma Sheng-mei, 194
- Ma Yüan, *Landscape in Moonlight*, 241
- Mahayana Buddhism (see American Buddhism, Far Eastern sources of)
- Mallarmé, Stéphane, 71
- Maltby, Paul, *The Visionary Moment: A Postmodern Critique*, 125
- mandala, 70–71, 78, 80, 81, 144–45, 151, 162, 172
- mantra, 12, 107, 135, 165, 168–69, 193, 201, 241
- Marxism, 184, 220, 227
- meditation, ix, 2, 3, 11, 12, 14, 66, 69, 70–73, 76, 78, 80, 84, 87–88, 91, 92, 95, 99, 104, 105, 107, 110, 112–16, 120, 122, 126, 133–34, 142, 145, 156, 159–61, 165, 171, 174, 168, 185–86, 207–28, 229, 231, 241,
- Meltzer, David, 10, 111, 119, 122
- Melville, Herman, 212; "Bartleby the Scrivener," 212, 214, 217
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 6, 8, 85–86, 88, 98, 237; *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 85; *The Visible and the Invisible*, 85; "Cézanne's Doubt," 85–86; *Adventures of the Dialectic*, 237
- Milarepa, 76, 79
- Miles, Barry, 156; *Ginsberg: A Biography*, 156, 173
- Milne, A. A., 115
- mindfulness (*prajna*), 6, 7, 84, 86, 89, 90–92, 96, 157, 181, 204, 206, 231, 234
- Mitchell, Joni, 7, 16
- Modernism, 23–25, 41, 60, 85–86
- Modernity, 31, 81, 152, 153
- Mohr, Michael, 11, 124, 136; "Emerging from Nonidentity," 124
- Moog, Bob, 68
- Morrison, Toni, *Beloved*, 210
- Müller, Max, 30
- Murphy, Patrick, 11; *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*, 46
- Murray, Albert, 231
- Naess, Arne, 148–49, 153 (also see Deep Ecology)
- Naropa University, 8, 16, 93, 120 167
- Nash, William R., 207
- New American Poetry Anthology*, 105, 118, 122, 136, 146, 154,
- Nineteen Ancient Poems, The*, 49
- nirvana (nibbana)* (see enlightenment)
- Nishitani Keiji, 86, 98; *Religion and Nothingness*, 86
- non-duality, 53–54, 112, 114, 124, 150, 157, 241
- Oates, Stephen, *Let the Trumpet Sound*, 239
- Objectivist poetry, 6, 93–95
- Oda, Mayumi, 117, 180
- Okakura Kakuzo, 7, 27, 37, 42
- Olson, Charles, 23, 85, 94; "Projective Verse," 85, 94
- Ondaatje, Michael, *Anil's Ghost*, 236
- Oppen, George, 8, 90, 93–94; *Of Being Numerous*, 90; *This in Which*, 94; *Selected Letters*, 94
- Orientalism, 8, 12, 16, 24, 30–31, 42, 41, 55, 60, 66, 190, 191
- Owen, Steven, 42, 92, 98; *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, 92
- P'ang-yun, 242
- Padmasambhava, 64, 75
- Partridge, Jeffrey, 177–81

- Paul, Sherman, 46
- Paulenich, Craig, 77, 80, 94, 98, 120, 122; *Beneath a Single Moon*, 94
- performance poetry and theory, 11, 76, 140–41, 151; Anne Waldman's chant performance mode, 164–67
- phenomenology, 6, 85–86, 88, 231, 237; and American modernism, 85–86
- Pirsig, Robert, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, 184
- Poe, Edgar Allen, 184, 239
- Porter, Bill (see Red Pine)
- Portuges, Paul, 130
- positivism, 26, 31, 35
- Pound, Ezra, 4, 15, 25, 85, 88, 92, 93; "Ballad of the Mulberry Road," 49; *Cantos*, 93
- prajna*, 89, 171 (also see mindfulness)
- Pulleyblank, E. G., 48, 58, 60
- Pybus, Diana, 156
- Pynchon, Thomas, 9
- race, 3, 22, 28, 38, 210–11, 214, 216–17, 219, 228, 230, 232–33, 237
- racism, 213–14, 225, 226, 233–34
- Rakosi, Carl, 93
- Rauschenberg, Robert, 67, 77, 85
- Rawls, John, 213
- rebirth, 29, 110, 191–92
- Red Pine (Bill Porter), 5, 45
- reincarnation, 12, 152, 190, 198, 201, 203, 205, 219
- Remnick, David, 161; obituary tribute to Ginsberg "Kaddish," 161
- Reps, Paul, 119, 121, 173; *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 173
- Rexroth, Kenneth, 91, 93, 98
- Reznikoff, Charles, 93
- Richardson, Samuel, *Pamela*, 239
- Rimbaud, Arthur, 164
- Rosenthal, Bob, 161, 173
- Rothenberg, Jerome, *Technologies of the Sacred*, 139; *Shaking the Pumpkin*, 139
- Russell, Bertrand, 242
- Sabina, Maria, 164
- sadhana*, 169
- Said, Edward, 24
- Saijo, Albert, 105, 118
- Sakurai Keitoku, 21–22, 36
- Salinger, J.D., 1, 185–186; *Catcher in the Rye*, 1; *Nine Stories*, 185; *Franny and Zooey*, 185; *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters!*, 185
- Samapatti*, 126
- samsara*, 3, 33, 96, 159, 164, 166, 170–71, 208, 210, 214, 222
- sangha*, ix, 23, 145, 156, 185
- satori (also see enlightenment), 124, 129–30, 136, 241
- Scalapino, Leslie, 10, 117, 120, 121
- Scarlet Letter, The*, 182–83
- Schechner, Richard, 139–40
- Schelling, Andrew, 77, 81, 113, 116, 122
- Schwerner, Armand, 23, 93
- Scott, David, 195
- Seager, Richard Hughes, 126–27, 136; *Buddhism in America*, 126
- Senzaki, Nyogen, 118, 119, 121, 136, 173; *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 172
- sesshin*, 124
- Shaffer, Eric Paul, 184
- shamanism: Native American, 11, 139; Tibetan Bön, 156
- Shelley, Percy B., 84
- Shinozaki, Michio, 200, 206
- Shitou Xiqian, *Song of the Grass Roof Hermitage*, 84
- Shonin, Morito, 114
- shunyata* (see *sunyata*)
- Snyder, Gary, 1–2, 4–5, 7, 9–12, 15, 17, 26, 45–62, 69, 98, 103, 105–06, 110, 112, 117, 118, 119, 121, 122, 139–54, 177–79, 182, 184, 224, 228; *The Back Country*, 140; *Mountains and Rivers Without End*, 12; *Myths and*

- Texts*, 141; *The Old Ways*, 140–41, 148, 151, 154; “On the Path, Off the Trail,” 142; *Practice of the Wild*, 12, 142–45, 148–49, 151, 154; *Regarding Wave*, 140, 151, 154; *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, 45–57, 140–41; “Statement on Poetics,” 146; *Turtle Island*, 140
- Social Darwinism, 27–29, 31, 39
- Soloman, Carl, 160
- sound poetry, 64, 67, 76; Domaine Poétique, 68
- spiritual materialism (see Chögyam Trungpa)
- Stambler, Peter, 45, 60–62
- Stein, Gertrude, 182, 235
- Stimpfl, Joseph, 191, 205
- Stocks, Claire, 197
- Stryk, Lucien, 93
- Sufism, 66, 76
- sunyata*, 31, 73, 74–76, 76, 94, 107–08, 128–30, 150–222, 241; Kegon definition, 32–33; Madhyamika definition, 32, 150–51; Mahayana definition, 164
- Surrealism, 66, 77, 163–64, 169;
- Suzuki, D.T., 2, 10, 15, 91–92, 98, 103, 105, 118, 119, 125–26, 128, 132, 177–78; *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 91; *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*, 132
- Suzuki, Shunryu, 11, 15, 112, 119, 120, 121, 124, 127, 129, 133, 136, 139, 180; *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 124, 127, 139; *soshin* (beginner’s mind), 124
- Tanahashi Kazuaki, 17, 113
- Tantric Buddhism (see American Buddhism, Himalayan sources of)
- Tarn, Nathaniel, 86–87, 99, 139; “Never Saying the Already Said,” 86
- Tashi Namgyal, *Mahamudra*, 158
- Tedlock, Dennis, 139
- Tei-Shin (see Fenollosa, Ernest)
- terma*, 69, 75, 78, 81
- Theravada Buddhism (see American Buddhism, South and Southeastern sources of)
- Thich Nhat Hanh, 9, 14, 16, 17, 181, 204, 206, 223–24, 233, 235; interbeing, 233–35
- Thoreau, Henry David, 12, 142
- Tibetan Book of the Dead, The*, 67, 74
- Tibetan Buddhism (see American Buddhism, Himalayan sources of)
- Transcendentalism, ix, 23, 24, 55, 233 (see also Emerson)
- Travis, Molly Abel, 210–12, 225, 228
- Tricycle Magazine*, 7, 180
- Trinh T. Minh-ha, 189, 206
- Trungpa, Chögyam (1939–1987), 7, 8, 12, 15, 16, 17, 69–70, 81, 85, 87–96, 98, 99, 155–66, 171–73, 174; *The Dawn of Tantra*, 8, 85; translation of Gampopa’s *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation*, 87, 171; *The Myth of Freedom*, 88, 90; *Crazy Wisdom*, 7, 156–57, 172; spiritual materialism, 96; the feminine principle, 163
- Tsunoda Ryusaku, 42, 223
- Tu Fu, 92
- Turner, Victor, 139
- Uchiyama, Kosho, 208, 215, 228
- upaya*, (skillful means), 104, 213
- Vajrayana Buddhism (see American Buddhism, Himalayan sources of)
- Vedanta, 69, 76, 241
- Venuti, Lawrence, 46, 60
- Village Voice*, 166, 173
- Vimalakirti, 143
- Waldman, Anne, 12–13, 15, 79, 93, 113, 116, 122, 155–74, 224; *Helping the Dreamer*, 164–65; *Structure*

- of the World Compared to a Bubble*,  
 167; chant performance mode,  
 164–67
- Waley, Arthur, 59, 93, 224
- Warhol, Andy, 67, 77
- Watson, Burton, 5, 45, 58, 60, 116, 120,  
 121
- Watts, Alan, 2, 10, 53, 103, 105, 119,  
 126, 128–29, 137, 177; *Zen and the  
 Beat Way*, 128; *Beat Zen, Square Zen,  
 and Zen*, 128–29
- Weaver, Raymond, 131
- Weinreich, Regina, 125, 135, 137; *The  
 Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac*,  
 125
- Welch, Lew, 105, 177, 184
- Weston, Jessie, *From Ritual to Romance*,  
 235
- Whalen, Philip, 9, 10, 15, 23, 26,  
 103–22, 133, 140; “Real self,”  
 103–05, 111, 115, 117; *Some of These  
 Days*, 113; *Enough Said*, 113; “About  
 Writing and Meditation,” 115–16
- Whalen-Bridge, John, 13, 15, 54, 60,  
 177–87, 224, 228
- White, Lynn, 140, 146–147; “The  
 Historic Roots of Our Ecologic  
 Crisis,” 140, 146
- Whitman, Walt, 86, 99; *Leaves of Grass*,  
 86
- Williams, William Carlos, 10, 93, 158
- Wilson, August, 241
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 6, 95, 99
- Wright, Dale S., 136, 207–08, 225, 228;  
*Philosophical Meditations*, 207
- Xue Xue, 50
- Yoshikawa, Kojiro, 48, 60
- Zen Buddhism (see American Bud-  
 dhism, Far Eastern sources of)
- Zhiyi, 29
- Zhu Xi, 50
- Zu Tang Ji*, 47
- Zukofsky, Louis, “An Objective,” 94

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[www.sunypress.edu](http://www.sunypress.edu)

ISBN: 978-1-4384-2653-2

