

Cages of No Thought: Challenges to Contemporary Zen Literature.

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Few philosophical traditions have devoted more thought to no-thought than Zen Buddhism. Zen's central practice is a form of meditation that works to free one from treating thoughts – both concepts and the mind-forged manacles of perception – as adequate vehicles for truth. Almost all Buddhist traditions treat conventionally conscious thought as the product of deep affective drives that obstruct beings from perceiving reality. This thinking creates an illusionary matrix of images, dichotomies, subjects and objects, creating the illusion that they are autonomously existing things in the world. Chief among them is the notion of an autonomous, integral self – an ego capable of discriminating and judging among the objects and others it encounters. The goal of Zen is to discipline, and indeed to trick, the mind into a kind of short-circuit, thoughts demolishing each other, until the practitioner is enlightened in *satori*, the enlightened recognition of universal interdependence beyond all judgment and conceptualization.

For most Buddhist schools, among the central principles are *sunyata* (emptiness) and *pratityasamutpada* (dependent-arising or dependent-origination). From this perspective, all beings are empty of substance and identity – that is, they do not have autonomous existence. They are empty of essential content. They are constituted only through a dynamic, ever-changing mesh of interrelations and mutual determinations. Their only content and essence is this web of relations. In essence, all things exist only as all things.

To these core notions Zen adds at least two more: *tathata*, from the Sanskrit, usually translated as *suchness* or *thusness*, and *wu shi*, from Chinese, usually translated as “ordinariness” or “no complexity.” Awareness of suchness is awareness of “it is what it is,” “the way things are” unclouded by the attachments, aversions, and ignorance of sentimental thinking. The interconnectedness of all things paradoxically manifests itself to a clear mind as recognition that each aspect of reality condenses all others, embodying the principle that every particular is pregnant with the immanent fullness of Buddha-nature. This insight reinforces ordinary, undramatic, unexaggerated, concrete experience. As an aesthetic, Zen mistrusts naive, sentimental, and meta thinking – the naive because it is “asleep,” the sentimental because it is fraught with imaginary compensations generated by desires, and the meta because it de-natures the world by focusing on the higher-level formalizations of discursive reason. Interdependence naturally involves the utterance of its own concept, and so Zen art continually implicates itself in its own deconstructions.

The values of the Zen aesthetic are simplicity, ordinariness, spontaneity, and naturalness – but also paralogic, since overemphasis on logical chains (including cause-and-effect) substitutes conceptualization for experience. Zen is profoundly influenced by Taoism and Japanese nature religion, both of which view nature and place as the access points of primal immanence. Zen style rigorously emphasizes natural beauty and the deep link of awareness to a specific locality in which it is embedded. However, since the causal chains of desire infuse normal perceptions of reality, even the most everyday utterances are fraught with fiction. Thus in Zen the naive real is perceived to be ideological, while the representation of this truth is paradoxically and

necessarily conveyed through artifice and language. One must go through language to see it dissolve. Parable and koan are the main vehicles for the communication of Zen wisdom.

In Zen meditational practice, the more defined a thought is, the more delusory it is. This is not only a matter of conscious intellection, but also perception. Time and space viewed as independent forces or entities are reifications, coping mechanisms produced by the ego, which desires its own shaky solidity to be justified and reinforced by the world's. The goal of meditative practice is to undo this conditioning, to see through dichotomies and discriminations, and to apprehend in experience the nonsubstantial interplay and interdependence of all things.

Zen practice is especially non-verbal among Buddhist schools; even its use of mantras is quite limited. Yet as in all mystical traditions language can be repurposed through irony, paradox, and poetic disorientation to be a primary vehicle for liberating minds from conceptual thought. Two forms of language are especially revered. The first is the koan – the famous riddle that cannot be answered using logic or common-sense; the koan elicits rather a nondiscursive – indeed, an anti-discursive -- response that demonstrates the hearer's intuitive understanding of the emptiness of conceptual thought and conventional language. The other is the Chinese poetic form of the shih favored by the great Chinese Ch'an poets of the Tang dynasty. This form, which we might call "poetry of the open field," employs the generalizing qualities of the Chinese language to deploy a short, intense, and elegant set of concrete images in an undefined, "empty" field of signification – the mind as an empty page, as it were. The elegant evocation of place in Zen shih emphasizes its ordinariness, free of abstractions and qualifications, while also

leading the hearer to intuit the scene as a representation of suchness, and, ultimately also a guide to this sense of tathata.

Somewhat paradoxically, behind all these evocations of the immediate experience conveyed through concrete images of nature and everyday life is a complex tradition of logical argumentation devoted to clarifying the meaning of emptiness. As Zen poets in Asia became increasingly interested in dialogue with Western philosophy, especially after World War II, as Zen teachings became popular in the US and Europe, these concepts of non-conceptual thought became increasingly part of Zen's character. Confronting the West's rich tradition of treating individual self-reflection and ego-affirmation as the goals of contemplation, Zen teachers sought to define the dynamics of non-definition. They sought to employ techniques of criticism and deconstruction with affinities to contemporary Western postmodernist and posthumanist philosophies.

I won't dwell on these philosophical framings of emptiness, but some taste of them is important to understand the starting point for modern Zen poets. The question of what is meant by sunyata/emptiness has been debated for centuries, giving rise to many schools within the Mahayana tradition. While every devotee of Buddhism affirms belief in dependent-origination and non-identity, how these words are interpreted can differ greatly. Let me mention just three important currents that are currently linked to Western currents. In one, emptiness is held to be only one side of an infinite plenum; emptiness in this sense is a critical tool used to dissolve illusions of substance, in order to reveal the fullness of infinite, dynamic possibility. From this perspective the great void of reality is, as it is often called, a plenum-void.

Several thinkers have found interesting analogues to this view in Western process philosophy. From another perspective, sunyata is similar to the infinite deferral and difference of Derridean thought; the job of meditating on sunyata is to prevent any concept of an indivisible absolute from taking root – even of the Buddha-Nature, and indeed even of emptiness itself. A third view is that emptiness is something like a fullness of potentiality as before the collapsing of the wave function, or a state of Tantric intensity that some commentators have likened to Deleuze and Guattari's plateaus of desiring. However they are conceived, sunyata and tathata require a short-circuiting of constitutive thought – but as is clear in even these short accounts, an intense engagement with conventional concepts is required.

This centrality of place and Buddha-nature has come under challenge with modernization and globalization, with the unprecedented mobility of people and ideas, and the depredation of nature on a global scale. Though Zen initiates are given a powerful sense of the history of the transmission of the doctrine, the doctrine itself has been resolutely anti-historical, treating social conflicts and transformations as inessential and ephemeral, as is time itself. In the militarist and War years in Japan Zen's reverence for older, putatively purer forms of poetry, like those of the Tang poets and haiku, combined with its anti-modernist idealization of nature, led to Zen's fetishization as an example of Japanese cultural purity. This stance was eagerly accepted by many practitioners, to the extent that this anti-political and pacifist religion was co-opted by the war culture, and even as major a Zen poet as Shinkichi Takahashi wrote some aggressively imperialist poems.

The story of Zen's encounter with modernization is particularly linked to Japan's encounter with Western ideas and artistic forms, and thereafter to cultural globalization – the diffusion of Zen sensibilities to the West and its de-territorialization with regard to Japanese and Korean culture. The most striking response was perhaps by Takahashi, revered in Japan as the greatest Zen poet of the 20th century. Although he was raised in a devout rural Buddhist family, Takahashi ran away to the city at an early age in the 1920s and became a sort of lumpen-Bohemian, scraping by with odd jobs, reading voraciously, and writing. He encountered Dadaism through two translated essays of Tristan Tzara's, and became one of the leading voices of the movement in Japan. His Dadaist poems are replete with iconoclastic techniques, paralogical constructions, the jumbling together of kanji, katakana, and romanji scripts, European words, multilingual puns, and fantastic, disjunctive imagery. In the late 20s this very model of the wild, irresponsible, self-imperiling poet turned to Zen, and undertook severe monastic discipline in the Rinzai sect – a sect devoted to koans and sudden enlightenment. Takahashi considered the connection between Dada and Zen to be obvious and natural. Dada's absurdism and repudiation of language's connections to truth Takahashi felt was of the same order as Zen's use of surprising juxtapositions and disorientation in koans. In his mature art, Takahashi repudiated dada and surrealism. As one commentator puts it, "in the end, dada, ironically, served not as Takahashi's introduction to European culture and literature, but rather as an introduction to his own native tradition."

Most of Takahashi's mature poems involve classical topoi of past Zen poets – evocative nature imagery, humble animal protagonists (such as sparrows, dogs, cats, goats, and pigs), and a strong sense of micro-settings. There often seems little to distinguish him from the wilder

exponents of the Cold Mountain poets and Japanese masters of haiku, other than a refusal to follow older fixed poetic forms and poetic language. He uses straightforward everyday diction, in which the sublimity of satori appears somewhat ironically. In this it epitomizes *wu shi*, ordinariness, the better to convey the concrete immediacy of the setting of enlightenment. Where Takahashi's Zen verse is original and unmistakably modern, beyond his use of free verse and modern language, is the extension of the heightened perception of nature to include technology and history. For example, in the poem "Burning Oneself to Death," the poet celebrates the self-immolation of a Buddhist monk during the Vietnam War, linking it to a fiery satori and the atomic bombings of Japan, leaving the specific political occasion as an enormous, powerful, potential negative space.

The surprising juxtaposition of natural imagery and technological artifacts like atomic submarines and space rockets works seamlessly on the customary three levels of Zen understanding: on one, the acknowledgement of the concrete existence of the most humble and familiar objects, made fresh in this understanding; then the sense of jarring incongruity in their juxtapositions; and finally, the sense of their interconnectedness and interdependence. It also reflects the sometimes bizarre and uncontrollable jumble of impressions that arise during meditation.

Even with these rockets and submarines, Takahashi's emphasis is on the irony of modernity thinking it has superseded nature. Takahashi's poems are not Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* or the views of many contemporary Artificial Intelligence scientists who are also Zen practitioners, who hold that Buddha-nature undergirds machines as well as

natural beings. Takahashi retained the sense that the natural world is the great source of Zen teachings, since it is free of the ego-investments of mass produced human artifacts – a theme that recurs in the frequent near-comic juxtapositions of the sparrow and the rocket or the four-engine airplane.

This preference for the natural world – so deeply ingrained in Zen’s tradition – presents certain problems. Devoted as it is to the negation of delusory conceptual dichotomies, Zen appears to be reluctant to renounce this nature/mass technology dualism. This dichotomy has become more emphatic and obvious since World War II and especially the post-1960s, as more and more of the world is drawn into a global technological web. Of world historical significance for Zen was its wildfire-like dissemination in post-World War II US, especially in California. The immediate catalyst was the writing and teaching of D.T. Suzuki, a lay practitioner of Rinzai Zen, and a prolific translator and interpreter of Zen texts into English. Suzuki had spent many years in the US as a young man, where he grew profoundly attracted to the American Transcendentalists. Their non-theistic reverence for Nature meshed, so Suzuki felt, with similar reverence in Zen.

The most important poetic exponent of this Western Zen has been Gary Snyder, who has achieved a status in the US similar to that of Takahashi in Japan, as the greatest living Zen poet. Snyder was a core member of the Beat movement in the 1940s and 50s, after which he spent seven years studying in a Rinzai monastery in Japan; there he read the Chinese and Japanese Zen classics. When he returned to the US, he sought to emulate the shaggy Cold Mountain poets of the Tang Dynasty, alloying the sensibilities of modernist American free verse with the

suggestive, laconic, and detached tenor of the Zen models. What these currents had in common was the view of poetry as an “empty field.” Eschewing argumentation, explanation, and hypotactic subordination in syntax, Snyder’s poetry was intended to alter the reader’s consciousness to view reality itself as an ahistorical empty field.

Snyder’s highly influential early poems were almost invariably set in the wilderness, a zone he knew well as a backwoodsman and forest ranger. Like Takahashi, he had been influenced by Dada and Surrealism, but also by Anarchism, with which he considered Zen to have elective affinities. The challenge to traditional Zen for Snyder came in the recognition that the historical forces of modernization were actively destroying the wilderness, and thus eradicating the main source of the metaphors and experience leading to enlightenment. Snyder’s Zen was intensely inflected by his ethnographic knowledge of the myths and ritual practices of the Native Americans of California and the Northwest Pacific coast. Synthesizing these two strains seemed natural, particularly because both granted central significance to place and both rejected abstract philosophizing. Gradually, Snyder’s work has become more and more explicitly political. The values of Zen have not receded in his work, but in place of the ahistorical dissolution of time in humble everyday work and embeddedness in nature, Snyder has preferred a mytho-history of the fall of human culture through modernization and potential future redemption through a return to ecological consciousness and reverence. While the goal remains the achievement of a Zenlike Native American consciousness of concrete interdependence in the natural world, Snyder’s work has become increasingly “thoughtful” – in particular, it has been informed by the science and polemics of ecology. The contemplative

element has receded, the didactic has come to the fore, as the need to restore natural balance on a global scale becomes an urgent agenda.

Perhaps the most original and iconoclastic response to the problem posed to writers by Zen's anti-linguistic, anti-representational paradoxes has been by the California science fiction novelist, Kim Stanley Robinson. A student and friend of Snyder's, Robinson professes to be deeply influenced by Zen, although he is not a disciplined practitioner. Robinson's first major works were a trilogy of novels now known as *Three Californias*. In each of the books, Robinson narrates a distinct, different future for Orange County, a densely populated territory east of Los Angeles that was not long ago, in Robinson's own childhood, known mainly for its thriving orange groves. The first novel, *The Wild Shore*, narrates a future in which the US has been brought down by a series of neutron bomb attacks, quarantined by the world community, and has devolved into wilderness communities. In the second novel, *The Gold Coast*, the county has become a neo-liberal dystopia, with stacked highways, aimless youth, its economy driven by drugs, entertainment, and weapons manufacturing. Written in 1988, it is an unnervingly precise prediction of the present. The final novel, *Pacific Edge*, narrates a realistic utopia, after a revolution against the global financial elite, in which communities govern themselves and their resources democratically and with close connections to their land.

Remarkable for three novels written in largely realistic prose, is how such epic structures manifest Zen aesthetic values such as the concreteness, ordinariness, and repudiation of hierarchical, mystificatory romance. Much can be said about Robinson's paradoxical Zen realism, in which great flights of fancy are grounded in careful descriptions of precise local

topography and lore. For my purposes here, the most important dimension is Robinson's insistence that history -- geographical, geological, and cultural -- be included in the Zenlike focus on place. Tathata in this perspective cannot focus only on the micro-environment of the poet and meditator; it must include the historical experience of the land itself and its relation to the human beings who try to shape it and whom it shapes at the same time. Not only does this call into question that the goal of Zen is to achieve enlightenment in a timeless moment that erases all historical conditioning, it insists that the imagining of the future, the potential lines of flight, be included in the awareness of suchness. It can be argued that Robinson's approach at least poses a way to dissolve the dichotomy between nature and technological culture, the nature-good civilization-bad dualism that haunts Takahashi's and Snyder's poetry; but at the same time, it may expand the requirements of concrete awareness beyond the frame of meditation and sudden awareness, if not of poetry. Robinson's model -- and much of Snyder's later work -- has been called Zen Anarchism or Zen Marxism. While political Zen strikes many as an impossible paradox, one can view it as an alternative strategy to the *via negativa* of traditional Zen writing, in which the world and language are stripped to "shining moments." The *via positiva* of Robinson's Three Californias piles up realistic novelistic and historical details, layer upon layer, thought system upon thought system, each persuasive and plausible, yet cancelling each other out as "true histories" (a phrase used in each novel to describe itself) -- and yielding a vision of Buddhist social practice in the un-narrated, implicit spaces between them.

To conclude, Zen may be the most effective body of thought devoted to dissolving conceptual thought, while also encouraging high poetic achievement. But no matter how original or effective contemporary poets are in adapting Zen to modernity, modernity's own

hyperemphasis on the materialization of conceptual thought forces Zen poets to counter it. It is always difficult for poets to be silent; how much more so in the conceptual noise of the hypermodern world.