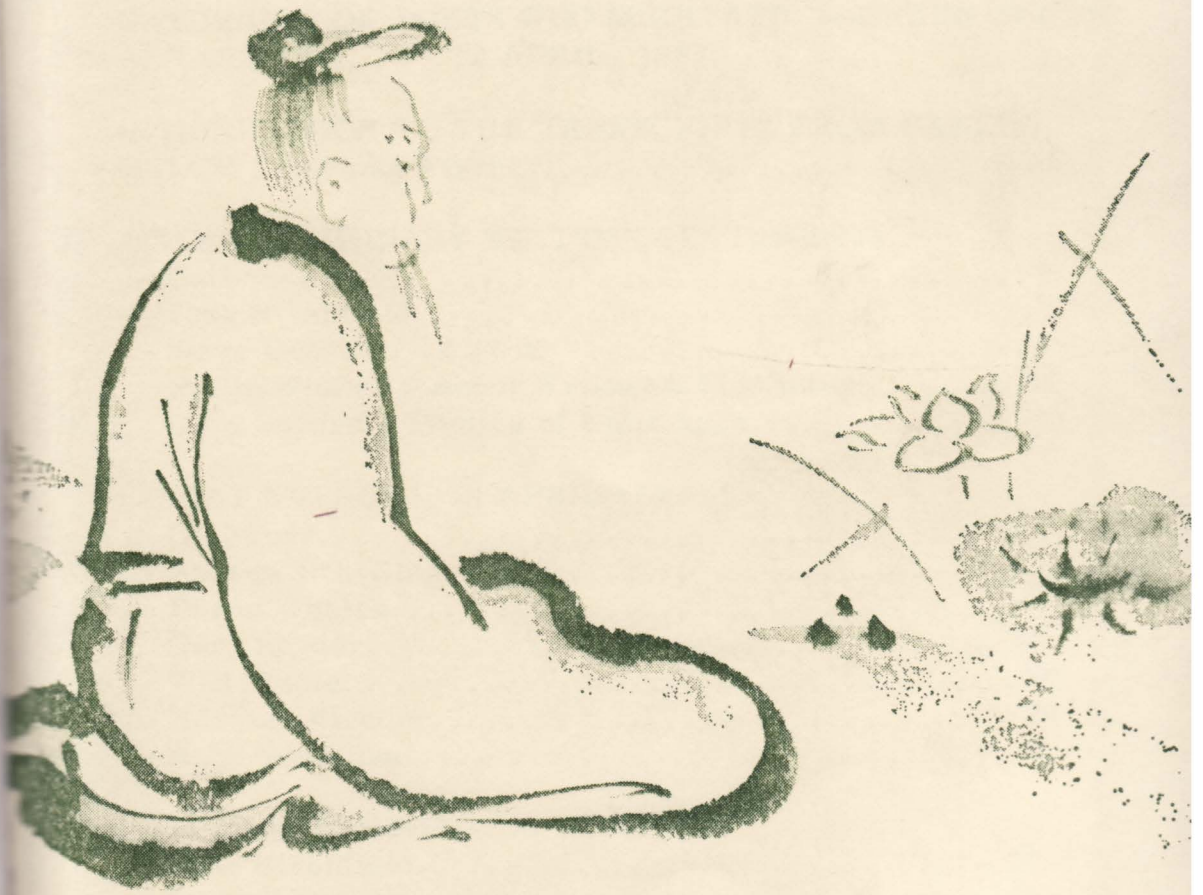
Jimmy & Lucys' House of "K" no9



"The Poetics of Emptiness"

JIMMY & LUCY'S HOUSE OF "K" #9 January 1989

Cover: David I Sheidlower, printer.
Ink painting from the collection of KRL.

Additional editorial information on page 118.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is the last regular issue of Jimmy & Lucy's. It has been a group effort, many people have helped—contributors willing to write articles on the strange things we suggest, readers with inquiries, praise and imprecations. Copies of the magazine always seemed to travel hand to hand, enjoying themselves in places and in ways we couldn't imagine. Without knowing that one or two hundred people would find each issue, and find something worth reading, we could not have kept it going. Now is our chance to thank everyone, especially Gordon who proofread almost all of it.

This is not a last testament though. Mainly it's a chance to rethink the labor intensive, almost paleolithic technology we've used to produce the magazine. House of "K" will probably reappear in days to come. When it does it will happen irregularly, unexpectedly, perhaps in a different format, likely as not under some alias. If you are on our mailing list you will hear of it. Or word may reach you through some friend, which is probably how you heard about Jimmy & Lucy in the first place.

Benjamin Friedlander
Andrew Schelling

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: "THE POETICS OF EMPTINESS"

I've been doing zazen for almost 20 years and have been writing for longer than that but until I began doing zazen I couldn't get the feel of writing. When I finally did get the feel of it inevitably that feel had everything to do with zazen. I had to have a way of writing that put me into the world rather than out of it looking at it and describing it.

In 1985, while I was living and practicing Zen in New York City, I decided to start talking about all of this, so I organized an event called "BEYOND WORDS AND PHRASES?: A SYMPOSIUM ON LANGUAGE AND MEDITATION." It was held at Greystone Seminary, Zen Community of New York, in Riverdale, the Bronx, and included ten poets/practitioners of meditation, among them the poets Jackson Mac Low, Alan Davies, Charles Bernstein, Nick Piombino, who is a poet and theoretician coming from a background in psychotherapy, Lou Nordstrom, a Zen priest and philosophy PhD, myself, and some others. The event was organized as a presentation/discussion, very serious, not much of an audience or publicity, a working situation. We had a pretty lively day of it, and, as I recall, the main point of controversy, and it was a hot one, was whether a poem is on the page or in the mind.

Returning to California, I wanted to see what it would be like to do this again, on another coast, where, I anticipated, we'd have a very different kind of discussion. I began talking with Gary Snyder about my idea, and soon the thing took quite a different shape: we'd have a large, public event, the centerpiece of which would be not discussion but demonstration of how meditation and poetry work together.

So, in April of 1987 we held our "THE POETICS OF EMPTINESS: A COLLABORATIVE GATHERING OF POETS WHO MEDITATE," a full week-end at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, where I live and work as a Zen priest. About 30 people joined Gary and I and Phil Whalen, Anne Waldman, Jane Hirshfield, Gail Sher, Steve Benson, Andrew Schelling, and Will Staple for the whole week-end, which included, as the New York event had not, zazen, meals, Zen talks, and hanging around time, and was capped by what we called a "Buddhist Poetical Performance and Meditation Event" in the Meditation Hall which was attended by probably 300 people.

It was I think an extraordinary event and I am very grateful that Jimmy & Lucy's is devoting this issue to publication of the proceedings. I believe that there is a great deal to be said and understood about this subject of meditation and poetry and that we are only now beginning to think about it after many years, collectively, of practicing these disciplines here on this continent. It has been a notion of mine for many years that began I think early on with my appreciation of Williams and Olson that what we are about here is a writing that is not the same as European writing but rather comes out of this wide landscape and experience of mixing of peoples in a democratic way. And I am convinced still as I have been for many years that the transmission of the meditative traditions of Buddhism are central to the making of this writing.

Since 1987 I've been continuing. In the Spring of 1988 I led a workshop at Green Gulch that combined again time on the sitting cushion with time behind a pen; and in April 1988, for Buddha's birthday, we held a "passion play" here, based on a poem by me, with masks and theatrical direction by Annie Hallatt, a direct outgrowth of some of our discussions during the week-end of the 1987 event.

Unquestionably, the work will continue. I do not think we will have spectacular results or even terribly noticeable results. But very steadily and gradually and clearly I think it becomes more and more impossible not to think of our minds our bodies our hearts and our words as of a piece.

——Norman Fischer

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Some Preliminary Statements Circulated Among the Participants

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GAIL SHER

It would be impossible for me to separate my spiritual practice from my writing practice. When my writing practice began I had already been practicing zazen for ten years and was thoroughly trained in "following the schedule" no matter what. Before I started writing I had always wanted to write but felt I had "nothing to say" so why bother. At one point at Zen Center I hit bottom and knew I had to do something I strongly affirmed. I decided to wait to find out what that thing was and it turned out to be writing. Fortunately this was during the summer at

Tassajara and my "boss" at the gatehouse arranged things so that it often fell to me to be the one with a three hour break in the afternoon. Thus began a practice of writing every day. The crucial word is practice. For me writing was a practice from the very beginning and I attended my writing periods with the same spirit of attending periods of zazen. You just go. It doesn't matter how you feel or what's bothering you or what you accomplish or create or even if you write anything, but you attend each writing period every day. At first they were about three hours long and my whole life was arranged around them. They gradually shortened and I even hit lows of half an hour. Nevertheless, except for certain times when I decided for one reason or another to stop them, they have always occurred in this way. I don't plan my writing. I do plan for my writing periods in the spirit of nothing-to-be-gained. So the context in which my writing takes place is derived from Zen practice.

JANE HIRSHFIELD

Poetry is zazen in language. Sometimes it is one-pointed concentration, probing forward into a solidly experienced truth; sometimes it is shikantaza, language (which is one of the bodies human experience can take) being language.

One of the things zazen teaches is that being coheres—emptiness is not chaos, but form; yet form also is not form, but empty. A true poem embodies this knowledge, and will also embody the attributes that arise from it— compassion, wisdom. Right

speech and right concentration are each links in the eight-fold path, links that become one in the writing of poetry. The poem is a moment of practice made visible.

The rhythm of thought and the rhythm of the words themselves: the poem's breathing. The poem's house of sound, play of consonants and vowels: its posture. And the wide mudra of its meaning. The intention we bring to the zafu and the attention we bring to the poem are not different.... Buddha is Buddha; form is emptiness; language is silent breathing. In the spring the birds and flowers open their throats, in desire, in praise, in emptiness... each being's poem.

When we enter zazen everything is new—no breath repeats. Each poem is new. Without judging, breath and language arise and pass. But if Buddha already is, why practice? If language carries wisdom and delusion freely in its river, why craft and hone our work? The true poems are effortless efforts, samadhi-born, but how many hours of painful knees must live in them....

Zazen and poetry are each deeply intimate paths, self becoming self, true nature's expression. We are calling this conference a congregation of poets who meditate, but surely all poets meditate—that is poetry writing's nature. But the vocabulary of practice can illuminate the vocabulary of poetry, and vice versa. Among ways to integrate practice and Western culture, poetry is a door already at least partially open, a good place to begin.

STEVE BENSON 12 27 86

My interest in writing is often to break down givens or complexes, to afford a fresher impact to things as they are, without my ego constructing in advance an image or story about how things are. This is like my interest in meditation, for the sake of breaking down coils and constraints I'm thinking and feeling in. Relaxing and accepting, as well as the tangible chords struck by knocking ideational shells of the head against the manifest elements and relations in the text.

The syntactical strands of my writing are virtually always plainly referential, announce something about something, but they are always not-that, too: the language is a heaving surface proposed somewhere in the depths and heights of signification, and the persistence of intentions functions only on the level of the poem (the proposition of this text as a surface, reading out the dynamics of a flux of mutually related, transmuting contingencies).

The writing is investigative, without an assured goal. It feels like asking, what is being, given such-and-such experimental constants (what is knowledge, what is communication, what is self, what is reading—"being" has no constancy of significance). In the transpositions, the sea-changes, the slippings through the veils of censorship that the acts of writing, of reading, of publication do effect, the ground of this investigation is integrally altered in ways beyond my control: I can imaginatively foresee them to some degree, but I am most interested in what I will realize through them in any instance of apprehension and response. Thus the writing, as a response to the relationship between the text eventualizing on the page and that forethought

and afterthought prompting my work, constitutes an occasion of meditation, as does any reading.

My willingness or enthusiasm with regard to improvisation is prompted less by an eagerness to take risks of spontaneous display in public, I think, than by a commitment to the field of the ears, as an immediate and fertile ground for realization of poetic composition. When we read a poem in a book, it's most engaging when apprehended not as something already-done but as something present and immediately embodied in our articulate, responsive reception of it. Though I love to read aloud in public, it seems an almost ironic gesture when the opportunity is there to articulate work in relation to the particular imperatives and options of the circumstance of that realization. Improvisation affords a silent but persistent, adaptive audience participation, as the listener is engaged in the dynamics of the composition, its options and fatalities, coordinating his or her alternative projects of composition with that of the speaker in an ongoing tandem construction that dissipates as it proceeds in its production. The conceptual play of initiatives, blockages, and drifts bears analogy to those which, helplessly or willingly, may transpire in a meditational practice.

I am interested in the dynamics and discoveries of "mind wandering" or inattention, and happily assume this function on the part of listeners and readers, including as it does that reversion to the discipline of attention. The "level" or valency of any given set of particles of text or speech being up for grabs or not specifically preconditioned by the preceding material, the reader or listener is asking persistently "What is it?" The discipline of attention is refreshed and reinforced rhythmically with the discipline of inattention, just as understanding is always in active and shifting relationship

with misunderstanding or unwillingness to understand....

Without specifically deciding in words what it is to be in advance of composition, I do train these activities on what matters to me in the instance—on a discovery rather than a resume or explanation, by and large, of what I can take most seriously, ask truth from, under the circumstances. Personal, emotional, daily-life issues are thus not distinct from theoretical issues of knowledge, poetics or metaphysics. The realization of enquiry as an unstable performative event is more central to my intentions than the derivation of any conclusions or the beauty and balance of an overall statement or poem; consequently, the written work survives and adjusts itself to publication in a posture of compromise between its function as documentation and its function as grounds for further research and reflection. I have the feeling this two-facedness is not peculiar to my work but is endemic to writing that alerts the imagination and that quickens that pulsation of tension and release, of reciprocal discovery and transformation, that lets the work seem to "live" with a stimulating presence of its own (that is, it carries or conducts the alternating currents of the writer's and the reader's recognitions and responses through its manifest material). Anyhow, whether what I discover to matter to or challenge me will make a difference to the reader, and if so what difference, is not my responsibility. Any outcome is provisional.

Writing, like meditation, serves me as a means of checking and challenging myself, of stopping myself in my preoccupations by derailing their devices, inviting me to start over, to plow under, acknowledge what I can't control or articulate comprehensively by naming.

PHILIP WHALEN / ABOUT WRITING AND MEDITATION

I thought that I'd write books and make money enough from them to travel abroad and to have a private life of reading and study and music. I developed a habit of writing and I've written a great deal but I've got very little money for it.

With meditation I supposed that one could acquire magical powers. Then I learned that it would produce enlightenment. Much later, I found out that Dogen is somewhere on the right track when he tells us that the practice of zazen is the practice of enlightenment. Certainly there's no money in it. Now I have a meditation habit.

Jack Kerouac said that writing is a habit like taking dope. It's a pleasure to write. I usually write everything in longhand. I like the feel of the pen working on the paper. (I'm typing this because I'm not going to correct it, I'm just talking.)

In my experience these two habits are at once mutually destructive and yet very similar in kind. I write for the excitement of doing it. I don't think of an audience; I think of the words that I'm using, trying to select the right ones. In zazen I sit to satisfy my sitting habit. It does no more than that. But while sitting, I don't grab on to ideas or memories or verbal phrases. I simply "watch" them all go by. They don't get written; they don't (or anyway, very seldom) trip the relay on my writing machinery. Considering that I've spent more days in the past fifteen years sitting

zazen than I have spent in writing, it's little wonder that I've produced few books during that time.

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GARY SNYDER / POETICS OF EMPTINESS

RIDICULING LITERATURE

Humans are endowed with
the stupidity of horses and cattle.
Poetry was originally a
work out of hell.
Self-pride, false pride,
suffering from the passions,
We must sigh for those taking this path
to intimacy with demons.

—Ikkyu

Ikkyu, a Zen Master and fine poet himself, laughingly ridicules poets, knowing that for them spiritual purity is out of the question. "Intimacy with demons" is not to be seen in the light of the occidental romance with alienation, however. Demons are funny little guys, like horses and cows, that we share the universe with, and poetry is a way of celebrating the actuality of a non-dual universe in all its facets.

There is a depth of mind that floats our many selves, our information- and word-hoards, and is yet always a sea of surprises. Whatever made people think Mind isn't rocks, fences, clouds, or houses? Meditation is the art of deliberately staying open so that myriad things can experience themselves. One of the ways that phenomena "experience themselves" is in poetry. This craft steers between non-verbal states of mind and the intricacies of our gift of language (a wild system born with us).

When I practice zazen, poetry never occurs to me, I just do zazen. Yet one cannot deny the connection.

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Talks: Friday Evening, 10 April 1987

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GAIL SHER

I'd like to share four statements with you.

The first one is something Jung said in Dream Analysis, a series of private talks he gave in the 1930's. He is on the

subject of Buddhism and speaks of a consciousness that is not dominated by its contents.

> These contents attack our consciousness with the fire of desire and we become possessed by them. The Buddhist idea is that we should not be devoured by them.... One has to empty the conscious, as it were, of those overpowering contents, or if anything is there, it should be like fishes in a pond. They are not masters of the pond. They are simply content and so cannot rule it. The pond is the very reason for their existence. It is the vessel which contains them. They don't contain the pond though there are always fishes suffering from megalomania who think that they contain the pond, that they are able to drink all the water and have it in their inflated bellies.

And then there's this line from Broch's Notebooks where he says, "The work of art is finished when the idea in it has been obliterated."

And Foucault in The Discourse of Language says, "All I want is to allow myself to be borne along within it and by it, a happy wreck."

I want to say that the idea of emptying one's consciousness is the same as emptying language. If anything's left it is like the fishes in the pond. The pond is predominant. I want to write from a place such as this, so that everyone understands with their Pond Mind. Using language as language rather than as a vehicle for something else is the way I have found. There is a place in everyone that instantly grasps what comes from here. It is an uncovering,

a situation of possibility, very enjoyable.

ANDREW SCHELLING / REMARKS FOR THE "POETICS OF EMPTINESS"

What are the twisty beginningless roads that lead a person to anything?

It is not easy to trace the precise lines of influence, but going through school in the U.S. during the mid to late 60's delivered an excitingly immediate, if somewhat chaotic, glimpse at the possible dimensions of Mind. That was a period when psychedelics briefly became a standard coming-of-age rite in this country, and a wild colorful folk subculture sprung up around their use. Casual tripping got a lot of bad, inaccurate press, but underneath there occurred some remarkably durable social and artistic changes. Stuff that has direct parallels, if you take any anthropological perspective, to cultural revaluations all down through history.

Anyhow, those who took such rites seriously and founded friendships on long heartsearching conversations, discovered themselves quickly at odds with the surrounding society's premises, all of which seemed with terrible inevitability to lead from education through commerce to war—a scary diminishment of what anyone's capable of.

Tea-heads, acid-heads, hitch-hikers, footloose wanderers embarking on indefinite journeys with nobody as guides. We went mostly by instinct. Those who mistrusted instinct called this travel mania rebellion. Maybe it was. Schools certainly furnished no clues to wise living, nor did the available jobs. And hardly anyone seemed to be supplying tools that a sane person might reasonably apply to the predatory civilization around us.

So it was a haphazard, at times desperate searching through old books that led somehow to Asia's so-called religious traditions, which were at that time blowing early seeds into America. I have the distinct memory of finding in some bookstore a dog-eared old Bhagavad Gita with an ancient, multi-armed statue, broken but splendidly serene, on the cover. Through the years I encountered its stony calm like an old friend.

So words, words found in books, and the dawning recognition that you could talk heart to heart with learned people from other cultures, other millenia—not ghosts, but companions of the Way practicing some marvelous dialogue throughout time and space. Words began to arise both as mirror of something deeply consequential within, and as a foundation of courage supplied against the encompassing society's violence and banality.

Working one's way through scholastic studies of Buddha, Tao, Shiva, Kali, seemed tediously wrongheaded though, compared to the clarity encountered in poetry. The discovery of a range of verse, especially the Oriental traditions, was for me as fresh and invigorating as a walk under the stars. I remember looking in the eyes of a friend to see if he'd caught the same

thrill of poetry. Haiku, Chinese lyrics, Diamond and Platform Sutras. Then, it seemed almost by accident, a sudden deluge of contemporaries——the small press.

It hit me with terrific force when I realized these writers weren't just using words to talk about something. They were producing states of Mind, configurations of language arranged into some wakened thing. Poems seemed ideograms of alertness on the page. You could carry these things around in your pocket, a literal state of Mind.

Buddhism as I understand it doesn't mean true or false. It just means waking up. It's funny, but the parallel is that poetry seems the only place words aren't true or false. The question is, do these words wake you up.

Buddhism arose in India——that's where Gautama Buddha wandered around and discussed with his disaffected countrymen the discoveries he'd made under the Bodhi tree. There's a good historical example here. For hundreds of years poetry, religion, and philosophy in India had centered around the ritual ingestion of a psychedelic, soma. But this gave way over the years to other techniques of insight. No one knows why. Maybe soma just got too unpredictable. A dead end. Similarly here, wherever psychedelics got used with intelligence, their application also dropped away over the years for other practices. Sometimes for a handcraft, or disciplined training in the arts, sometimes for meditation and word-oriented vehicles. By which I don't mean just mantra or heavy chanting. These have their use. But poets demand the precision and subtlety you acquire by playing on all the elements of language. Language——a thousand string'd lute. The ear hasn't been born yet that knows what all its strings

sound like.

At some point I met on the field of poetry the poets of classical Sanskrit. It was a memorable moment. These writers had drawn careful, accurate distinctions between all the emotional conditions that supercede each other in the human heart. And they had developed a poetry that wanted to account for each of these states. I sometimes run into people who would see as "Buddhist" only that poetry which exhibits a certain cool. But the Sanskrit poets insisted the heart's self-born intelligence could get tasted, through poetry, from the heat of any emotional moment. It's these savors, what Mind gets transformed to at its richest moments, that bind for me the twin practices of poetry and meditation.

I've seen parallels drawn between Buddhist metaphysics and poetic practice, some of which are clearly useful. But the planet being wide as it is, and Mind such a surprising terrain, I'd resist any comprehensive statement of procedure such as "spontaneous prose" or "first thought best thought" as getting to the pith of writing. With some people it might take several dozen years of hard work to loosen up to a point of easy alertness. Buddhist lore's packed with accounts of tough labor carried out for years with gritty patience and gentle humor. I can best describe my own writing practice by a phrase Mel Weissman applies to zazen——"continual refinement."

In other words you make poems. That doesn't just mean technique. It's the same as making love——unfettered urge is there from the start——it's part of our make-up. With some people the impulse takes a frightfully demonic form. But the task of refinement——as poet, lover, or contemplative——has no

limit. How long do you sit in meditation before posture and breathing are correct? How long is too long for a poem to take shape? Sometimes it occurs on the instant. Other times it is the effort of years.

Not that writing and meditation substitute for one another. They just clarify certain issues in similar ways. One clear correspondence: both demand hard work, but work which accepts uselessness as a principle term. Sure you can write a polemical poem, just as you can "sit" outside the gates of Livermore weapons lab—make it useful by locating it in some special context. But that's different. The eerie word magic which haunts poetry, the quiet sorcery that smolders in meditation—not much credence given them by our contemporary world. India to some degree, parts of Africa probably. But in the West? Well poets and yogins are not quite so intimidating as we used to be. So what? Maybe we've gained something, now that contemplatives don't get hired as "doctors of political medicine"—magic poisoners that is—or poets to wreck crops with spells and curses. This gives a delightful autonomy—call it "breathing room"—to those who want to sit down and write. Or who just want to sit down.

One curious note I'd like to end on. Hardly anyone pays attention, but give or take a hundred years Gautama Buddha was contemporary with Panini, the world's first, probably the world's greatest, linguist. Coincidence? Who's kidding who? Something big was going on, these simultaneous inquiries into Mind and Language, 2500 years ago. And it was happening across the planet—Greece, China, Palestine. This I think is where our so-called "modernism" really begins. Practicing Mind and practicing Language. They've been pretty inextricable ever since.

So inextricable in fact that some hold Mind to be nothing but the play of language. That contradicts my own experience. But clearly, words and the way we put them together are at this historical juncture the primary vehicle we've got. Almost everything we know about human life on this planet is locked up inside this mystery. I'd look, alongside the established Buddhist lineages for another, a subterranean movement which trades with the world at large. Some elusive, night-wandering caravan loaded with strange goods, picking its way up the treacherous trade routes of History. Call it by a Sanskrit term, kavyayana—the Poetry Vehicle. "You don't need no ticket, you just get on board."

PHILIP WHALEN

I became a poet by accident. I never intended to be a poet. I still don't know what it's all about. If I wrote poetry at all it's because I could finish it at the end of the page. Maybe it would run halfway down the next page but it would come to a stop. What I wanted to do with writing was to write novels and make money like anybody else. And now I find myself in this ridiculous industry of writing these incomprehensible doodles, and why anybody's reading them I can't understand.

As far as meditation is concerned I'm a professional. I've been a professional since 1973. And that's my job. I find it very difficult to sell. And that's interesting, that's another job I have, to sell you on this idea that it's a good idea to sit. That's where the poetry maybe comes into all this, that it has to be an articulation of my practice and an encouragement to

you to enter into Buddhist practice. To get yourselves trapped into it—I hope. And then try to figure out how to get out of it. It's harder to get out of Buddhist practice than it is to get out of writing poetry.

I hardly write anything anymore at all, except sometimes I write in a journal and I say the sun is shining or something like that, or recently Michael McClure was in town and we had a nice time, or the flowers are blooming. And so I don't have much to say because I talk all the time. I have to give lectures, I participate in seminars, and I have not much chance to wander up and down a hillside picking flowers and picking my nose and scratching my balls and whatnot. And thinking of hearing, having a chance to hear what's going on around me, or hearing people in restaurants or on a bus. There are no restaurants in Santa Fe worth sitting in, there are no buses at all. So I don't hear anymore, hardly at all, unless I travel. Like I was recently in New York and around, and now I'm here, and it's very interesting to hear what's going on outside. While Gail or somebody was talking there was a robin outside raising hell. But that doesn't mean anything. I mean I'm not about to write a poem about how so-and-so was talking, then a robin outside was raising hell. It's strange, it's just naturally that way.

And so I'm here under false pretences on about four levels. You're going to have to deal with that however you can. I'm quite willing to talk to people and explain things to people if they have a question or a problem. Or sit doltishly looking out the window. So you're going to have to, if you want something from me, try to get it. Because I'm not about to offer anything. I don't have anything to offer. I'm sorry. That's the emptiness part.

I think there's a great misunderstanding about what emptiness is, the idea that emptiness is something that happens under a bell-jar when you exhaust all the air out of it. That's not quite where it's at as far as I understand it. The emptiness is the thing we're full of, and everything that you're seeing here is empty. Literally the word is shunya, something that's swollen up——is not, as often translated, void. It's packed, it's full of everything. Just as the idea in Shingon Buddhism, the idea that everything we see and experience and so forth is Mahavairochana Buddha, the great and unmanifest, unborn Buddha, is what we're actually living and seeing in. Wallace Stevens said, "We live in an old chaos of the sun." Well we're living in a live chaos of Mahavairochana Buddha. So leave it or not. What are you gonna do with it? How are you gonna handle that?

Okay that's enough, thank you.

GARY SNYDER

It's fun being here with all these other poets, many of whom I've never met before, and actually and explicitly addressing an area that I think we've thought about from time to time, but we've been too shy to bring it up. Norman Fischer and Will Staple and I were talking about a year ago, after a brief workshop I did in San Francisco on "Wildness, Wilderness, and Language" and we got this idea of carrying on a little further. That's where the idea for this program started.

And yet I must confess that, like Phil, I don't have the faintest idea what my purpose is or what's going on, and I never have. I became comfortable with that mystery a long time ago—that I would never know how any of these things fit together in any explicit way.

At any rate, I started writing poetry when I was in my late teens as an effort to give voice to some powerful experiences that I had had mountaineering in the Pacific Northwest on snow peaks—experiences that touched me so deeply that I felt I must find some way to say something about them, and could find no way to do so. So at first I sort of invented poetry for myself since I hadn't read a whole lot, and then later discovered the works of Robinson Jeffers and D. H. Lawrence in particular, that validated at least the intention of my effort. I said, Ahh! somebody else has tried it this way too. And I became interested in poetry as a craft, as a working with materials and tools, a craft with a history, with tradition, with various applications and strategies all over the world over tens of thousands of years. Then I saw it as a great gift that has been given us to enable us to p.ay all the more with language, which to my notion is just a part of our own wildness: language is not something you learn in school, it is something you're born into. A complete fabric of wildness, not unlike weather, the thermal dynamics of weather systems; or energy exchanges in the food chain—completely natural and completely wild, part of what and who we are. Poetry is the further expression of that.

With such thoughts I began to be interested in Asian thought and Zen Buddhism, almost as a further development of my passion for mountaineering. I ran into a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins when I was about twenty and was suffering

from severe frostbite from having done a winter climb of Mt. Hood without quite proper boots, so I was thinking twice about this mountaineering business. And I ran into the poem by Hopkins that has the line in it, "The mind too has mountains." That was a little pointy instruction that struck me at just the right time. Some other words that hit me at just the right time were Lin Chi's in regard to something that Chao Chou said, "For thirty years I have been training horses and now I have been kicked by a young donkey." I read that while handling pack-string stock on a trail crew in the Sierra.

So I found myself in Japan, at the age of twenty-six, in a Zen temple with Oda Roshi, and in one of our early conversations I timorously asked him, I said, "You know, sometimes I write poetry. Is that alright—?" And he kind of laughed and he said, "It's alright as long as it truly comes out of your true self." And he said, "You know, poets have to play a lot. Asobi." That's what Oda Roshi said to me. That really flustered me, because the word asobi has an implication of really wandering the bars and the pleasure quarters, the behavior of a decadent wastrel. I knew he didn't mean that. So for about seven years while doing Zen practice around Kyoto, I virtually quit writing poetry. But it didn't bother me. Maybe my first exercise was not being bothered by it. My thought was, Zen is serious, poetry is not serious. In any case, you have to be completely serious when you do Zen practice. So I was completely serious, and I didn't write many poems.

At the end of that period, just before Oda Roshi died, I had a talk with him in his hospital, and so I said to him, "Roshi! So it's, Zen is serious, and poetry is not serious." And he said, "No, no—poetry is serious! Zen is not serious." I had it all wrong!

I don't know if it was by accident or if that was like some gift he gave me, but I started writing a lot more, and maybe I did a little less sitting too. I came to think that it was not worth worrying too much about either one actually. And the key word was play, for both of them. But this is—not that I accomplished that—but this is what I would like to think I understood—that to be dead serious you have to play. And that's on the side of poetry, and that's on the side of Zen too.

But for people in the world, all of us, who do "practice," there are many kinds of play. Working on cars, cooking is play, raising children is play, maybe going to war is play—and so in that sense poetry is nothing special. It would be maybe just what is given to us. And the tools and traditions of poetry may be not too serious either. Language is no big deal. Mind is no big deal. Vowels and consonants, perfectly okay. We take what's given to us, with gratitude.

In the Zen world, the poet is seen at both the beginning and the end of a life. Everybody knows that a child can do it, can come up with a verse, a rhyme, a song, a poem, a phrase that will delight us. And at the same time, the old Roshi on his death bed will write a poem, that's the last thing he does. The most refined and the most accomplished people will express their deepest understanding in a poem—this is in the Far East—and the absolute beginners will not hesitate to try. We will never be quite sure as to which one is better than the other.

This is a poem by the Zen Master Ikkyu, "Ridiculing Literature."

Humans are endowed with
the stupidity of horses and cattle.
Poetry was originally a
work out of hell.
Self-pride, false pride,
suffering from the passions,
We must sigh for those taking this path
to intimacy with demons.

Ikkyu was having fun with that, because he wrote poems himself and loved to tease. Part of the instruction here is not to be too serious, because it is the self-preoccupied seriousness that brings out the pride, the suffering, and the stupidity.

What meditation does for an artist or a craftsperson is to keep them open to seeing and hearing and feeling an Emptiness that is full of everything so it can respond to everything, everything can be in it. Walking into the meadow of consciousness, just walking there, allows the possibility of song. As we all know, you can't flog yourself into writing poetry, but you can flog yourself into doing zazen. That's only to say meditation is always available to us, truly democratic, and a way into our own inner life and actuality. Meditation eases the difficulty of creativity, and also humbles poetry—for poetry too often aspires to be "special."

"When I practice zazen, poetry never occurs to me." (That's been true with one exception. A poem came to me once while doing zazen, and maybe I'll read it sometime in the next couple of days.) "...poetry never occurs to me, I just do zazen. Yet one cannot deny the connection."

Question: Can you say that again about zazen?

When one does—when I do zazen, poetry never occurs to me. Yet you cannot deny the connection. Surely there are poems that got written because of the time spent walking around in those woods.

WILL STAPLE

I live outside of Nevada City, and I've made some money at this game because I'm good with third, fourth, and fifth grade kids, and I can bring poetry out of them. So, I didn't get into poetry to make easy money, but there are little niches that you can find.

I used to sit zazen at Bush Street long ago, but I feel now that most people's experience of Zen is perhaps different from mine. I have gotten sidetracked over the last seven or eight years into a form of Zen called koan study which is a curriculum, a point by point curriculum following a number of ancient books, where you learn to wipe it away, or just this or just that, or standing up, sitting down, talking with my friends, drinking tea—a bunch of answers like this that you recycle because you can use them more than once. And so I wrote a statement on koan study, because I don't hardly do any just sitting anymore. And I can see how I have gotten lost in koan study just the same way other people get lost in anything else. There are a number of us that are in the same fix, and we have three-by-five cards and we're always sitting around and we've got to run up—we don't really run but we ring a

bell—we have sesshins with an interviewer, a Roshi, and then three times a day we ring a bell, go up, make a bunch of bows, and make our presentation. The presentation is partly reading the Roshi's mind, partly an act of telepathy, partly a trance state, so if you don't take notes you may forget in fact what you said. And part, just being an unmitigated rogue who has the audacity to come in and make an incorrect answer with absolute authority and vehemence, and then when the Roshi says no, that's wrong, you say, "Uhh, check your notes!"

So with that introduction, this is "On Spiritual Practice."

Spiritual practice is spirited, has spirit. It includes the quiver, tremble, dizzy, shiver, faint, as well as steadfast, calm, enduring, totally real in a very vivid prolonged moment.

From my own Zen practice I have noticed that koan study is also one on advanced metaphor. It is poetic in that you show rather than explain or talk about, a presentation rather than an exposition or explanation. One vital word is enough in both poetic and meditative practice. Koans are also poetic in that they use one precise description to show something else entirely. In Zen the answering reply is inspired by the koan. In poetry, the same intensity of listening is required (if you write by inspiration). But you never know from where the poem is going to speak. The koan is a side effect of an inner calm that is not deluded. The poem is the thing itself, with nothing missing, nothing left out. The poem doesn't care about your state of mind. It doesn't even care if you know you are writing a poem. It has to come out or it will destroy you. Koans are the same answer that goes back hundreds

of answerings, though discovered new each time. Poems are more dangerous; they are always the first time.

My energy given in group Zen living seems to take away from poetic inspiration, as does work in the helping professions. There is more to give when you give, but there is a daily limit. Poetry is that part you get down, but inspiration includes spontaneous song, intense dream, daydream, trance, listening to long epics coming through you too fast to catch, the poems of love made up while still touching, peyote speeches from the spirit world, prayers in the sweat bath or on mountain cliff and so much more.

A good poet, a good Zen student, has no board on his/her shoulder. A poet doesn't care who said it if he uses it best. A koan answer doesn't mean anything unless you figure it out for yourself. Everybody could have figured it out before you made the poem that says it best, personal and universal, simultaneously.

Inspirited speech, utterance, evocation, poetry is spiritual. Is uninspired dispirited Zen spiritual? Daydreams can be inspired. When you approach each sitting period as if it were a life and death matter, Zen is spiritual, as when you neutralize your resistance to what actually is.

Will the further deepening of expanding emptiness silence my concepts and leave me mute in wonder? Will answering koans take inspiration from poems? Will self-less service? Will inspiring others?

I'm listening.

NORMAN FISCHER / MEDITATION AND POETRY

At their best, both of them, meditation and poetry are ways of being honest with ourselves. Only by honesty can we see anything because honesty opens the eyes or cleans them. Without it we'd see what we'd like to see, or what we think we'd like to see, or what someone else would like us to see.

Meditation is when you sit down, lets say that, and don't do anything.

Poetry is when you get up and do something.

I don't think there is any escape from these activities: all of us have to do both of them. And both of them are involved with the imagination, that human faculty that creates, envisions, or transforms a world.

Somewhere we've developed the misconception that poetry is self-expression, and that meditation is going inward. Actually, poetry has nothing to do with self-expression, it is the way to be free, finally, of self-expression, to go much deeper than that. And meditation is not a form of thought or reflection, it is a looking at or an awareness of what is there,

equally inside and outside, and then it doesn't make sense anymore to mention inside or outside.

Experience, I think, is a never ending adjustment.

Practically speaking I would say that meditation gets you used to failure and gives you great familiarity with the mind's excitement, to the point of boredom, and so much so that there is a great acceptance of all experience, and there is no wish to favor one kind of experience over another. It is all pretty remarkable. This attitude is an aid to poetry.

So you are not that interested in "poetic" experience nor in "poetic" language. These seem unnecessary exaggerations. Only that you know, as a human, that you live intimately, intensely, with language, honestly with it, in it, as it, and it is necessary to keep that up, to clarify and deepen it.

That is why some aspects of poetic form are not helpful. And that is why, with your eye on the main purpose of the poem, you feel compelled at first to challenge poetic form, and then later to simply do away with it (by which I mean to stop being concerned with it terribly).

How do you do this? Practically speaking, I think meditation offers a feeling for or sense of experience, very broadly, that allows us to find a way to do this. The grip on self can very naturally loosen, the grip on meaning loosens, and there is the possibility of entering whole-heartedly into a dark or unknown territory. That, and talent, a little, familiarity with poetic form, a little more, courage, and

luck. An interesting footnote is that it is not a struggle: it is the release from struggle.

I imagine that no really amusing (a word Ted Berrigan insisted on, and I understand as "from the muse") literary work was ever conceived without meditation. Without an insistent, intent, single-minded holding in the mind of a single object until it dissolves. I am convinced every poem involves this process, at least narrowly conceived. And the broader we make our meditation the more implications it has for our poetry.

Do not imagine that I am advocating a particular approach or that even worse I am suggesting a "meditative" verse modeled on the Oriental or Occidental poetry written in previous centuries by meditators or contemplatives. I read and learn from this poetry, but much of it I do not like very much.

No, I am talking about a life in which we can be radically simple. And out of this great simplicity or honesty one does what one can.

I think if meditation can show you that there is really no such thing as, nor would one want, a poetic voice, then it is already worthwhile.

If I am recommending one thing that can be clearly understood I suppose it must be an unerring sense of humor.

ANNE WALDMAN / POETRY AS ENERGY, SIDDHI, TERMA: NOTES

I've been writing since childhood, and since 1970 I've been a formal Tibetan Buddhist practitioner. I've also been involved since 1974 with the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado which is the first accredited contemplative college in the western hemisphere.

I guess the key word for me, in terms of how I relate my practice, my Buddhist practice, to my practice of writing, is energy. The Tantric understanding of energy is actually related to the experience of duality. First it would appear that you exist as a solid entity, and others are separate and solid as well. But what you come to in practice is to see the deceptive nature of these kinds of projections. We are all just conglomerations of tendencies, very un-solid as a matter of fact. You start to see the emptiness, the emptiness of "ego", in oneself and in others. You start to see through the thickness of those fabrications.

But that deceptive existence of "you" and "others" seems to rub together, and that interests me—how and where the rub takes place between my so-called "self", or whatever that consciousness or perception is, and the phenomenal world. I'm interested in the words and images and arrangements and collidings that occur, that come out of this chaos. There is a wild spark happening, and how you relate this experience through language can be very exciting. This experience can actually exist inside language itself, how the sounds collide. All this seems related to many Tibetan Buddhist practices, which are themselves explorations and transformations of energy. Energy

is energy. It is non-conditioned except through our nutty egos. This pure self-existing energy is also the potential of what in Sanskrit is called siddhi, literally translated as magic. You might consider poetry as a kind of siddhi.

So this ability to use the existing energy of the universe may be where poetry touches on the "playing" of duality. How you handle it or transcend it, or feel that gap that arises where duality seems to come to a standstill, that interests me. That powerful spark.

True "wisdom" or the best poetry seems to go beyond reference points. Especially the reference point of "me." Shakespeare does it all the time. Dante. The work brings you into present time. It is experienced. It breathes in the sense of Emily Dickinson asking, Do my verses breathe?

The poet James Schuyler wrote in a journal in 1960:

> One is often amazed by the ugliness of things, their great beauty. It is dangerous for art to take a great interest in such appearances since its main interest must be in its own center, which is of course indefinable except by virtue of its existence.
>
> Words are energy. Physical and psychic heat and force.

This resonates with the Buddhist axiom.

> If you see something beautiful don't cling to it.
> If you see something ugly don't cling to it.

"Appearances" seems a key word in Schuyler's note. It seems that not getting caught in the net of illusion yet delighting in the self-existing energy of the words is the point here. In shamata-vipassyana practice, which involves the technique of formless meditation in a seated cross-legged posture (there is a form of walking meditation as well), one naturally has thoughts arise but instead of latching onto them and making them solid, one perceives them as fleeting, illusory, and lets them go.

As writers we might become skilled at catching things as they arise or pass by or pass through us. This can be tricky. How do we discriminate? Are we simply mediums? Is anything that "comes up" valid? There are no clear prescriptions. There is some love and passion towards the words involved, which when the poem, the text is working, seems to transcend the neurotic self-referential mode. Or the cliche mode. Or the vague "poetic" mode which is filled with abstractions, weak language etc. Once you start developing your ear you can hear it.

Reading Wallace Stevens' "Description Without a Place", one is riveted by the word "seems" in its gorgeous play. Evidently seem, or this notion of appearance, has a root in the Sanskrit word samsara. Samsara, in Buddhism, is the vicious cycle of transmigrating existence, arising out of ignorance and characterized by suffering. Here is part of the Stevens poem:

> It is possible that to seem—it is to be,
> As the sun is something seeming and it is.
>
> The sun is an example. What it seems
> It is and in such seeming all things are.
>
> Thus things are like a seeming of the sun

Or like a seeming of the moon or night

Or sleep.

We talk on the Buddhist scene about "things as they are," not veiled or colored by our own projections. Back to the poem:

It is a world of words to the end of it,
In which nothing solid is its solid self.

Stevens seems to be playing in that lively field of form and emptiness, and also delighting in the form, the shape the words take, not to mention the music therein, which weaves its magic.

The Tibetan Buddhist "Maitri Rooms" practice developed by Trungpa, Rinpoche in which one takes particular postures in a series of five colored rooms which resonate with the energies and colors of the five Buddha families also informs the writing. There are five Buddha families which are actually five distinct ways or styles of behavior and perception. These five energies have their neurotic aspects—attached and fixated—as well as their enlightened or sane aspects. One example would be the Padma family, which is associated with the color red, sunsets, seduction. "Padma" literally means lotus. In its neurotic aspect, Padma family energy is very grasping and demanding in its seduction, wanting you for its territory and wanting you to buy its "trip." The wisdom of Padma family energy on the other hand is what's called "discriminating awareness wisdom" which is very sharp and precise. You start to appreciate the world, in practicing the postures of the Maitri rooms, in all its vividness.

As I come out of the blue room, or Vajra room, where the posture has been one of lying face down, belly to ground, arms

extended, head to one side, I notice the edges and lines between objects, between emotions, the clear shapes of figures on the horizon, the blocks and edges within speech, the spaces between words on the page. And then the further breakdown of words into phones and phonemes. Vajra family energy is related to intellect and cool precision. A more scientific approach perhaps. It has been described as having the qualities of icy crystals on a wintry bough.

One seems to pay greater attention to the nuances of phenomena, both material and mental, through the practice of Maitri, a word which literally means "loving kindness." It reminds me of the William Burroughs assignment to go out in the street and notice, for example, everything blue. Exercises of the attention. Gertrude Stein came to the conclusion when she was at Radcliffe working with Hugo Munsterburg, a protege of Freud's, that neurosis was "a disease of the attention." One wants to get back to a state which exists, in Robert Duncan's words, "Long before minding everything and finding fulfillment of self in everything." I think the practices of Dharma help.

Some of the pieces I write and sing are manifestations of states of energy as well as invitations to the dakini presences. Dakini is literally "one who goes in the sky" and refers to the semi-wrathful female yidams or embodiments of energy which signify compassion, emptiness and wisdom. They are playful and tricky and represent the space of fertility out of which samsara and nirvana arise.

I view poetry as a kind of terma or found treasure. In Tibetan Buddhism terma is a precious hidden teaching which can be found or unlocked from rocks, mountains, water, sky, but also from the mind-streams of great masters. Charles

Olson wrote, "I hunt among stones." The middle realm or Sambhogakaya is the body of light, between form and emptiness. Keats wrote he was "straining at particles of light."

The practices and rituals in this particular Buddhist tradition actually show you your mind in all its vividness. Whether Buddhist or not, simply by practicing basic sitting meditation one starts to glimpse the non-conditional quality of energy. Thoughts arise—good thoughts, bad thoughts, strong emotions, boredom, fantasies of the next diversion. Things that might knock you out of your posture they're so intense. You see them all as simply thoughts, not so solid after all, and you let them go as you breath out. This process of watching thoughts arise and letting them go resonates with the practice of poetry. One catches the thoughts, refines them in language, lets them go. Thoughts are not necessarily ideas, but what are noticed. And from some point of view, it's all sacred.

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Talks: Saturday Morning, 11 April 1987

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JANE HIRSHFIELD

I'd like to start by reading you a poem by the Sung Dynasty

poet Yang Wan-li:

> Now, what is poetry?
> If you say it is simply a matter of words,
> I will say a good poet gets rid of words.
> If you say it is simply a matter of meaning,
> I will say a good poet gets rid of meaning.
> "But," you ask, "without words and without meaning,
> where is the poetry?"
> To this I reply, "Get rid of words and get rid of meaning,
> and still there is poetry."

My sense is that of course the same is true of Buddhism, of Zen, of practice. When I began turning towards Zen per se, I did it because I found in Zen teaching the closest description to the way I already experienced the world as being—it was in accord with what I sensed but perhaps didn't have a vocabulary for. I think that the practice of meditation can be seen as a kind of vocabulary of being: a wordless vocabulary; and that the experience of sitting on the zafu forty minute period after forty minute period, sesshin after sesshin, allows you to recognize something that you're pulled towards because you sense that it is already true, already present. You may not know how to get there, how to become it... and yet, it's completely here.

So we practice to become what we are, what we already know, while realizing we may not know it as fully as we could because the vocabulary—the consciousness—is missing. And writing, I think, is much the same. Now, when I began practicing, I stopped writing for years. Some of us start to practice and write continuously, others pause. When I first came to Zen Center one of the things being taught at the time was "just do this. Don't do anything else while you're doing this."

And of course, that may be partly the explanation, but also, for me, one of the requirements for writing is time, a kind of very large zazen period which creates the chance for the superficial mental voice to still, for non-sacred speech, discursive, rambling mind, to still. Life in community didn't offer that kind of time, and I recognized this was so when I began, but I also felt that I wouldn't continue writing as I was. I knew that, if I truly wanted to write, I needed to find out more of what it means to be human. And so, gladly, I stopped writing, and years later, gladly, began again.

Recently I've been doing what I think of as writing sesshins: about once a year, I go to one of those generous and lovely places where you're allowed freedom from distraction. They put a group of writers and artists together and give you a schedule, no interruptions from 9 - 5. I find it a very monastic situation to be in and I treat it as such—I don't have breakfast with people and so I don't talk at all until the late afternoon. Also, while I'm there, I sit a good deal and I write every day—something I don't ask of myself at home, where I work more in the way Will Staple described: some inspiration and a lot of editing after that. I don't force myself to write, as I find that I rarely do good work that way. And yet, there are certain circumstances you can create around your life which create the chance for inspiration to come meet you; it's very much like putting yourself in a zendo in order to create the chance for meditation.

We may ask what is our task, our responsibility, as Buddhists and writers. Philip said that his professional job as a priest is to get people to practice, to bring them to practice. I'm the opposite of a professional as a Buddhist, very much a lay practitioner and not a teacher, yet I trust that my writing is a reflection of practice and know that I was myself originally

brought to Buddhism by writing which was not explicitly about Buddhism, but reflected Buddhist ideas, the literature of China and Japan. And so my practice as a writer is simply to have my life be seamless and to trust that process, to trust the continuity, that what you do on the zafu will be present on the page. I practiced shikantaza the whole time I was at Zen Center, and never worked with koan. The idea of an advanced metaphor system, as Will called koan study, intrigues me, but that was not my practice. I practiced with silence, with wordlessness, and a very few phrases are what I work with: life is suffering; Buddha is Buddha; form is emptiness; emptiness is form. These few things that come up and can be expressed and can be explored and that contradict each other.

I wanted to give you some sense of how I feel practice and poetry connect, so I've brought a fairly new poem. I did not sit down with the intention, now I will write about this part of practice, but after I finished it I saw how it reflects the central idea I have worked with for the past year. At different times you think and talk about different aspects—sometimes it is "life is suffering," sometimes "form is emptiness." This poem, I think, is an expression of "Buddha is Buddha." That things are already perfect as they are.

Each Step

Nowhere on this earth
is it not a place where lovers
turn lightly in sleep in each other's arms,
the blue pastures of dusk flowing gladly
into the dawn.

Nowhere that is not reached by the scent
of good bread
through an open window,
by the flash of fish in the flashing of summer streams,
or the trees unfolding their praises—
apricots, pears—of the winter-chill nights.

Briefly, briefly, we see it, and forget.
As if the spell were too powerful to hold on the tongue,
as if we preferred the weight to the prize—

Like a horse
that carries on his own back
the sacks of oats he will need, unsuspecting,
looking always ahead,
over the mountains, to where sweet springs lie.

He remembers this much from his youth,
the taste of things, cold and pure;
while the water-sound sings on and on, unlistened to,
in his ears,
while each step is nothing less than the glistening
river-body reentering home.

STEVE BENSON

I made some notes during the discussion last night. One thing I realized is I do have a meditation practice that is basically the same thing as zazen as it is practiced here, I just have a different posture and I never called it zazen. But

I do the same thing with my mind for half an hour at a stretch, when I give myself the time. You think of it as having different reasons but I'm doing the same thing.

In terms of writing, what I usually do is conceive of some sort of project as a frame or framework for what I'm going to write. I used to write spontantaneous bursts of poetry—they'd turn out as poems, especially after some trimming. But I was very interested in the improvisation, just starting to write and see where it would go—to generate a form through the interaction of the different sides of me, of the subject(s) of the poem that crop up and want to extend themselves, the size of the paper I was working on, whether I was using a typewriter or long-hand. All these things enter in and generate form and generate the issues in the poem.

I think then I became interested in extending what I would do in writing—not to do it only when I felt that semi-irrepressible "Hey, I could write now!" But to also do it when I felt like, "I don't know if I could write now, maybe I could...." And to take on the challenge of writing then. And so it seems that I hit on the idea maybe ten years ago or more, that I would make up some sort of a format or a frame, a project. I'd say it's like having a problem in the sense of a game. Like to make up some rules basically—as a sestina has rules. Or you can just say, well everything's going to have four lines in it, and the first line will have a color in it, and the last line will have the name of somebody I used to be in love with in it.

But then there can be all sorts of things, like a project Norman mentioned seeing me do in New York. It's characteristic of my work, in that I came up with this idea to do something for no good reason, and I did it once. So in that case, well, I

was just turned on by the quality of prose, the utterly useless gorgeous sumptuous fact of this prose, by the way that it juggled its meaning and sensuality. And I was interested in the isolation of things on the page, that if you're turning the pages of a book and it is this edition of Samuel Johnson's Lives of the Poets, there's something about "I love this page!" It starts in the middle of this sentence, and it ends in the middle of that sentence! And then that developed into the sense of the two-page spread. It's a very arbitrary but a very whole being that it had in my apprehension of it, in my relationship to it. And whatever being it has outside of that would be far from my reading.

I was interested in that, so I memorized all these things including the page number at the top of the page. You know, it says "Samuel Johnson," or it has some little subtitle just for that page. I did that for five two-page spreads of different books. Several of them were translations. Anyhow, I just thought I would use these phrasally to draw from, and to remake something off the top of my head. It took me a month or two to memorize them, then gradually to practice putting things together on walks in the woods. When I did it in front of an audience of course no matter how much I'd practiced, it was totally different because it was going to matter to other people in some way I couldn't predict. I couldn't predict what satisfaction they would find; but part of my satisfaction was in the field of present listeners as that on which I was inscribing my text. One of those present listeners was my tape recorder. But more importantly it was all the people who happened to be in the Ear Inn Bar of the Lower East Side in New York City, whoever they would happen to be on that day.

That's one example of a process of working. I'll make up rules and try to stick to them. I think part of the difficulty is

to find, to keep finding, the humor, the lightness in those rules, in my relationship to them, rather than to get stuck on my compulsiveness, which is polymorphous, perverse, and can flow in anywhere—creep and crawl and snag and so forth. It's part of the fun, "Oh hi compulsiveness, you're here again," "Is there a dividing line between us?" But to have an ironic distance—if no other kind is available.

It's also finding rules that will be familiar enough for me and ungainly enough for me. I'll be discovering my relationship to that rule. It won't be something I can take for granted. That's part of why I prefer to look for a new set of rules, a new project, whenever I feel something is finished, when I've done a public performance, completed a long poem or whatever kind of series it seems to be. Other things may build on the curiosities of investigation that have been in it, but I'll find a way to make it unfamiliar, to estrange myself from the work so that I have to fill it in with contents that I can't imagine in advance—the contents of relativity between what I already know and what the text knows I haven't written yet. So working on it is very reflective and reflexive, very much to see what will happen if I do this. It's not oriented too much towards the product, production is only one aspect of it. The practice of my work/play is what I'm really keen on, and the fact it is productive of writing is something I notice. But that doesn't seem to be something that I need to insist on in any regular way. And that it is a meditative practice, and engages a spiritual dimension, is something that I'm also noticing more.

A couple of other things. I'm thinking about cause and effect, the kind of linear this-means-that or one-word-does-something-to-the-next-word. That's something I feel I'm inclined to let go of in writing. I'm interested in and aware of the words

being among other words, the context as a persistent interrelationship, an activity, of things in a field—rather than the contact of one thing performing on another thing. They're all doing it at the same time. And I'm paying more attention to this or that at one time or another in my reflection on what is lazily happening there in the writing. But I'm interested in the polymorphous activity, that is touched on and brought into real-time activity in the reading of it. And certainly the reading of it, for me, is that experience within which the writing takes place. What I mainly am doing is reading it. Sometimes that includes writing on the page.

Also, I tend to avoid writing about. That seems to me to privilege presence in my participation in this literature, rather than to privilege "used-to-be," or what I was thinking about five minutes ago, or six years ago. I'm always interested in the fact that it is a record—or trace—of activity that happened in the past, including, like, I'm on the next line and I have the activity of whatever I wrote on the previous line lower down on the page. But that's beside the point. Or maybe the point of it is that there's an assertive fiction in my will toward immediacy rubbing against the will to stay attached to what's already proved known, to habit, to a purpose with a goal.

But taking a step away from "writing about" helps me invest presence in the writing, and discovery. So it's hard to say, because I'm quite aware of, quite ebulliantly amused by its referentiality. I enjoy a both/and relationship to that, both investing myself very presently in signifying, and also looking the other way, seeing it as metaphor, or seeing it as saying exactly the opposite of what it's saying. Whatever "exactly the opposite" could ever be.

WILL STAPLE

I'd like to go back a few million years. Originally I don't think poet and meditator were separate. I do think that in patriarchies the prostitute was the first professional. And I think that in matriarchies the poet was the first professional.

(laughter)

Now, I want to stress, poets existed before the concept of money. They used to sit at the table with the king, and there used to be ten ranks. The lowest was the buffoon. And the upper ranks could recite thousands of years of genealogies for hundreds of main families, besides knowing all the epics of the surrounding tribes by heart. And we have come a long way. But we do share a dark age. Buddhism has a dark age, poetry has a dark age.

There seem to be three groups—at least there were ten years ago when I was in the Bay Area—that were interested in poetry. One was prisoners and ex-prisoners, and people that had made prisons out of their lives—who had done solitary confinement. And you would often meet these guys hitch-hiking, you would pick them up. And they are among the few people that are writing in rhyme, and that have this old idea of memory. And in prisons in fact, people doing hard time, there are poets that have these long epics which they will recite, often of an erotic nature, with a lot of intonation. The cell block will be quiet, and this one speaker will be telling the tales of his exploits when he was on the outside.

The second group is larger. It's composed of people in

therapy: psychologists themselves, ex-mental patients, the certified insane. This is a very large group that's interested in poetry, and I'm not exactly sure why. But I think that there is a common thread of an ego problem perceived by both those that are mental patients—I mean these could be people in psychotherapy: respected doctors, dentists, lawyers, a wide extreme—but there's a perceived problem with the ego, which sometimes is why people get into various religious practices.

And then the largest group of people interested in poetry is other poets. As with this group. Over half of you are poets.

I was a post-beat, pre-hip poet. I was about in the lower middle range as far as the quality of my writing, and I haven't improved greatly, but most of the people who were better have gone onto other things or are still incarcerated or committed suicide.

I was involved in Zen in the early days at Bush Street. I also did mountain climbing a little earlier than that. And part of my practice was—in those days you could actually see your progress! You started sitting in the balcony. And then you got into the hallway closer to the door, and then gradually you got inside the door, and your seat would move towards the altar, and then as you got closer to the altar people who had been there longer would whisper, "Who's this guy, what's he doing here," and "Is he a threat to us?" Then when you had an interview you had the option of talking about Zen, or smoking filter cigarettes and watching daytime t.v. which was the option with Suzuki Roshi that I always took. This was a great teaching! Because these were the puritanical days of potsmoking when no potsmoker would ever touch tobacco.

No Berkeley intellectual would allow a t. v. into their home. And so to smoke these lousy filter cigarettes and watch bad t. v. with a Zen Roshi—Oh it gave me permission to accept my own perfection!

But at the close of the '60s something happened in mountain climbing in Yosemite. And something happened, in my perception, to Zen. It also happened in writing. Things closed up a bit. You had to know somebody. Or you had to have done a climb. Or you had to have the right robe. Or you had to be in some school and have done somebody else a favor so that you could get that favor returned in poetry. So this is when I bowed out of these disciplines.

Also I had other priorities for poetry. What I wanted in poetry was acceptance by a few old boys, some of whom are in this room today. And, now I didn't realize this until sitting just recently, that was also one of my reasons for sitting.

Meditation. I realize now that what I was searching for was some orthodoxy, so I could have a line—just like the Marxists have a line—and I'd be correct! I wouldn't have to worry whether my poems were wrong. Well. It didn't work out that way of course. And what I have done instead of publishing is to continue to write. And over the years I notice that the poetry is primarily reminders for myself. Though as my practice has continued what I think myself is has sort of dissolved, I have a bit more empathy. And I'm not sure if the poetry is reminders to myself, or just reminders. Because I noticed early the unsteady troughs and crests of the mind. When I was at the top of something I would write a poem, then when I was at the bottom I could look back at the poem and be reminded. "Oh yes, I forgot about that."

I think my best teacher was the Grand Canyon. What happened there I think is related to my practice. Moving one's body. I think there are poems at sites, at particular spots—Wobbly Rock, or Green Gulch gardens. There are poems there waiting to be written. And there are poems in your body. When you walk, or when you physically exert yourself. Or when you sit motionless a lot it settles. These poems come out. Just as they pass through you at a site. That's the only difference. Either the poems work themselves out through a settling process, or they pass through you. When they pass through you your main aim is to get them down without very much of yourself interfering with their passing through, because the activity of writing interferes with the activity of receiving poems. You work. The labor comes later, when you edit out the worked-on feeling to them. So that you can get the freshness of that "Ah, yehh!" The whole poem really passes through, or the insight passes through (maybe not in language) in a very few seconds. And then you say, "Now if I can only get this down." Then you start and you get a few lines, and then maybe the last line, and then you try to fill in.

But before there was a poet there were hunters. These individuals, of both sexes, had to be motionless for hours at a time. Technology was low. However, animals would pass right by the trail that you were sitting at, so you had to be still. There was not yet a clear idea of the separation of the species of mammals. You might try to convince a deer, "If you'd just come by here, we're going to give you a nice place to stay in a basket full of hot stones. We're going to put you inside our bodies, and we're going to make a nice altar out of bones, if you'll just come by here." I think those little prayers to animals probably kicked off poetry. And I think that settling down kicked off meditation as a separate activity. And I think now in this age the only time when you get to experience what people of previous ages felt was a normal

state, even a boring state, even a state where nothing was happening, is in a rigid meditation form. A long time ago, before electricity and cars and the domestication of animals, long ago, this was just normal. You didn't have to have Tathagatas and people that thought they were separate identities, because—I don't know why.

Philip Whalen: Everything was alright till Old Golden Face opened his mouth!

Will Staple: That's right!

PHILIP WHALEN

I am Philip Whalen, how do you do? My Buddhist name is Zenshin Ryufu which is very impressive. The reason that you have a name like that is you keep forgetting it and it makes you wonder about why you got it and why it's for you, because it's a very exalted idea. Zenshin means "meditation mind" and it's also a Japanese pun. It means something like "complete Mind." There's also a Zenshin essay by Dogen. Ryufu is two Chinese characters that literally mean "Dragon Wind" but in Chinese literature I found out it means "imperial influence" or "universal influence." It's pretty complicated, and you wonder, well what does that have to do with me? Four words—Zen Mind Dragon Wind. What in the world, what connection does that have with this individual who has received this name and is ordained as a monk? So that is a problem that becomes

more or less clear as you continue being a monk—what your name is. And of course names and poetry all come together. Gertrude Stein says poetry is calling the name of something. That's what we do all the time actually, is call ourselves. There's the story of the Zen master who every day would call his own name. He'd say, "Zuigan!" And he'd say, "Yes!" "Zuigan! Don't be misled by other people!" Well of course the other people were Zuigan too.

I like the idea somebody mentioned of erratic practice. It immediately reminded me of the kind of rocks that show up on the glaciers, that have been left around when the glaciers recede. These big rocks lying around on the countryside—and you know, being a boulder, or like they say, a burnt out stump, for ten years or something, is a good thing. People don't notice, do they? A lot of time you want zazen to be an erratic boulder. You can always do that. But a lot of time sitting out in a field there are no other rocks. It's a very strange appearance. You can't account for it—how the rock got there—unless you remember the glacier that carried the rock there and then went away.

I have a number of fancy titles at the Dharma-sangha in Santa Fe. But when push comes to shove it means that I'm the person who goes down and does the opening ceremony in the zendo every morning and sits two periods. And then I go down again at 5:30 in the evening and sit again with whoever shows up. And the rest of the time study. We have two seminars a week with Baker Roshi on the koans in the Shoyoruku as translated by Thomas Cleary. I've also been studying with Baker Roshi closely for the last three years with the intention at last of trying to become a Buddhist teacher, to help get this show on the road, which is still very precarious in this country. The chances as I see it of Buddhism simply becoming somethi ng

that people do on Sunday just like Methodism or Baptism or Catholicism are very strong. But I hope that there will continue to be centers in the country like Tassajara, or Shasta Abbey, or Mt. Baldy. There will be these hidden spots around the country where people can hide out and do more serious, concentrated practice, to keep the door open for everybody to get the chance to try it out, find out what it's like to not do anything except follow a particular schedule and do a lot of sitting and a lot of physical work. This is something that I think is necessary in order for human beings to go on being human beings. So far all we've been able to invent in the United States is the business of building small cabins in the woods and going there to hide out, then come back and write a book about it. This has happened a number of times, including one which is completely unobtainable, one of the best. It's a little book by Ebbe Borregard called Lean-To.

Anyhow, that practice, that sort of individual, hermit, erratic practice, is something that's really important. The danger of outfits like Zen Center or monasteries or city centers and all that, is that people will take them seriously as being real. People should invent their own. People should maybe start out in an official place, but they should find out somehow that we don't need the official business, the organizations, the license, or authorization. You've got to invent it. It's exactly like Lew Welch says in his poem about the rock out there, the Wobbly Rock. He says, "Somebody showed it to me and I had to find it myself." The quote isn't exact. Be sure and look it up, it's in Lew's book Ring of Bone. "Somebody showed it to me and I found it myself." Something like that. Lew was an erratic practitioner—who was a great poet.

The real tension, I think, is between official poetry, you know, such as we're taught in school and we put in libraries and so

on, and which we really believe in—and then there's what we do, and what our friends do, and the same thing holds for meditation. What we discover for ourselves and learn. At some point you can forget it and go off and make a pot of spaghetti, like we used to do when we'd go down here to Muir Beach years ago and gather muscles off the rocks and build a bonfire and put seaweed on the bonfire and steam the muscles and eat them and jump up and down in the waves and have fun. That was... enough. Probably enough. Or too much. Oh I guess Blake said it—"Enough, or too much."

That's all.

GARY SNYDER

The first person I ever met who was a practicing poet was Phil Whalen, when I was nineteen; he seemed very senior and eminent. We were both students at Reed College, but he was an ex G. I. and I was in the generation that had not been in the military. Philip was my first model as a poet, and a good one indeed. I find it very moving, now, to hear him describing himself as a professional at zazen teaching, Dharma teaching, and meditation teaching.

I suppose I could say that I am a professional poet as much as a professional at anything. For twenty-five or more years I've lived entirely by my poetry. Not by royalties alone—although there always have been a few—but by the lectures, the workshops,

the poetry readings. That's actually been my income. It has enabled me to live fairly comfortably in America for the last seventeen years and to raise a family. I'm very grateful for the fact that this craft, this art, really does support me. But like gambling—like being a card player or dealer, it's full of insecurities and surprises. We never know if we'll ever write another poem, it's not like a product that you can count on producing again.

I do think of poetry as being of more than one type. I don't draw a hard and fast line between poetry and prose either. There is a vast range of possibilities in what we call poetry, that are all valid—each in terms of what they set out to do, what role they play in life, or what role they play in the society or in a community. No need to generate notions of pure and impure.

But for me and I suppose for many of us there is nonetheless a trace of an idea of the pure, and my sense of it was in part developed by my acquaintance with Chinese aesthetics, Chinese poetics. Chinese poetry and the aesthetics of Chinese poetry are very much involved with Ch'an, or Zen. My discovery of Zen was interwoven with Chinese poetry. Both of them, for me, have a remote connection to mountaineering—as what I had intended to say last night briefly about it, but it slipped by—is that mountaineering is not to be understood as an act of courage and accomplishment, not to be understood as in some cliche term as a dangerous or masculine act.

Mountaineering taught me vulnerability, opened me up to the literal impermanence, the total scariness, the literal voidness of the ground under your feet, the exposure as we say. What deep and soulful thoughts and imaginings that

exposure aroused in me. So I guess we could say that mountaineering is an extreme form of spiritual materialism in that you are taking some very very literal physical matter, granite walls or slag heaps of volcanoes, and scaring the wits out of yourself on it. But not just for the sake of scaring yourself, because then also it is the strategy, the companionship, the camaraderie, the skill, the management of the rope, the management of the friendship, that makes it really the game that it is. It's a very human exercise, that softens you in fact. And next is love, in love I was wrenched further—vulnerability and scariness, and delight.

It was out of those kinds of adventures that the shivers that Chinese poetry gave me kind of began to intersect with what I could hear going on in the literature of Zen, (in fundamental Buddhist literature too), and could see it in a sense going on in Chinese landscape painting as a visual presentation on the nature of Mind. That is to say: highs and lows, rushy bottoms, little houses tucked here and there, clouds, people lost in the clouds, people in a garden down somewhere, a cow walking off in the corner. You see, that's the Mind. That's what a Chinese landscape painting is. So that's a long way of saying that what I appreciate in poetry is, as the Chinese say, that which is plain. That which is not gaudy. That which does not stand out. That which does not impress you in any fancy way. Or as the Roshi who says that "Uncooked people take delight in novelty, cooked people take delight in the ordinary." What delights us most is the mystery of the ordinary, that's where Chinese poetry has so often excelled. The Chinese themselves have declared, in their writings on poetry, that the ordinary is the sublime pinnacle of poetry—this ordinariness, mysterious ordinariness, mysterious plainness. I've hoped to bring that to my own poetry from time to time over the years, but the poems in which I thought I was doing that have been usually dismissed by critics as

boring. Well at least they're plain! I have got the plainness if not the mystery.

To do many kinds of writing you can structure yourself, propose programs and schedules for yourself, be highly organized, set yourself to a schedule, make rules for yourself, and you can do a great deal. It can be every bit as structured and deliberate as building a house. And it should be, properly. I am an organized person, but being organized doesn't guarantee that those occasional poems that surprise you will come. There are two kinds of things that one can do in writing, one can search things out, stalk them, track them, master them—and get them. I do that mostly with prose. The other kind of move is the one that is suddenly standing just behind your shoulder, breathing on your neck—and then is carrying you off. Of the two, being chosen is by far the highest, at least in terms of poems that it brings, the ones least expected. In both cases the skills of mastery or the ability to be available are for me somehow tied up with and enhanced by the practice of meditation. Meditation, zazen, makes one available, and also when the time comes, capable of striking—and even capable of choosing when we would do that. But it is not just zazen of course. These are practices or habits that are conducted in daily life on many levels, and in a sense can be summed up as a kind of mindfulness.

After that's said, there's a lot more about how one goes about doing this as a writer, what the strategies of the craft are. That's the pleasure the craftsperson takes, and you don't have to share that with everybody, but craftsman to craftsman—craftsperson to craftsperson. That level can be taught.

Poetry is democratic, Zen is elite! No! Zen is democratic,

poetry is elite! Which is it? Everybody can do zazen, only a few can do poetry. Everybody can do poetry but only a few can really do zazen. I've never been sure what it is.

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Talks: Saturday Afternoon, 11 April 1987

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GARY SNYDER / POETRY AND ZEN IN CHINA

This was an idea that just came up over breakfast, to take some time to give credit to the traditional sense of the relationship between poetry and practice within Buddhism in Asia. From one standpoint we needn't think about it because we certainly have our own interests and our own tradition of writing and performing poetry in this country that need not invoke any traditional usages. The very fact is that in the Zen tradition poetry has played a strong role in teaching and practice, and in the communication and exchange of insight, of realization even. Also, in the relationship between the world of Zen practitioners and the larger world of literati, artists, literate people—the public, the Chinese public—poetry and calligraphy have been the very exchanges that have taken place between the lay world and the Buddhist monks' world.

I'll limit myself to China, with just a word about Japan. First of all, China has one of the world's great poetry traditions. The largest single corpus of printed published poetry in the world is Chinese. As of the year 1800 there were still more books in print in Chinese than in all the other languages of the world combined. The collected poems of the T'ang Dynasty alone run to dozens of volumes. Chinese poetry started with folk songs and evolved into a very refined lyric mode speaking of history, nature, intimate personal feeling, and insight. The Ch'an Buddhist world became the Buddhism of choice of the same class of people who enjoyed old books, did calligraphy, and learned to write poems.

In the Zen tradition, the Ch'an tradition, there are the poems of practice which you might call liturgical, which are the gāthās or the "verses" such as we chant at mealtimes. Those are also poems. They rhyme and fit into the patterns of traditional Chinese verse, and are fairly simple. Verses such as, "Oh all you demons and spirits, we now offer this food to you—may all of you everywhere, share it with us together," or "We wash our bowls in this water, it has the flavor of ambrosial dew—we offer it to all demons and spirits, may all be filled and satisfied, om mākala sai svāhā." Those are verses.

Employing the forms of the high tradition, using the traditional four line and eight line verses—four line and eight line poems of the mainstream tradition with either five character or seven character lines—Zen priests came to rely on poetry as part of the expression of their training, their practice. In the process of that the great corpus of poetry, known almost by heart by everyone in those days, was absorbed into the teachi tradition, particularly in Lin-chi Zen; and the quotations, lines and couplets from great key classic poems, as memoriz were then used as a shorthand mode of communication in the

sanzen room in uttering a brief point of clarification, of showing the nature of a certain understanding, by a quotation—by the appropriately selected quotation—from one of the great T'ang or earlier poems.

This goes with what Shigematsu-san was mentioning last night when he said he would like to know what do we think of capping verses. Capping verses, or as they are called in Japanese, jakugo, are quotations from Chinese poems that are remembered, and then spoken out or quoted out in Zen communication or Dharma exchange or Dharma combat situations. They are still very much part then of the refined tradition of Japanese Zen practice. It became formalized even a little more, to the point that in traditional koan practice, in the monastic tradition though not in the lay tradition, in Rinzai Zen, one works with the koan theme, masters it, makes a successful presentation, and then there's one more challenge given to the student by the teacher. The last challenge for that particular koan, for many koans, is "And now, what is the line of poetry that will express this?" There is a line of poetry that makes the same point. "And that line of poetry," he might say, "is somewhere in the T'ang Dynasty." And at one time it was expected that your familiarity with this material would be such that you could even remember it, search it out in your memory and find it.

As time goes on, everything becomes more democratic, and people don't read so much, and schools aren't so good, and things go down hill. So they anthologized the most important couplets into little sleeve manuals that Zen monks carry around in their robes. These anthologies—I guess they weren't really made until Zen went to Japan—the common one is called the Zenrin Kushū or "The Anthology of Phrases from the Zen Forest." It is organized according to the number of characters or words in the response. It moves from one word,

and then two word and three word sections and it goes up as far as double-five couplets and double-sevens. There are thousands of these. A contemporary Rinzai monk will be asked to hang onto that little book and then the teacher says, "Okay, you've got everything in the koan but now I want the jakugo, I want a capping verse for it." He might even give a hint and say it's in the double fives. You go study these and read down and try to find the one that is right, and take it back to the teacher. That is a contemporary use of the tradition of Chinese poetry in the honing of koan study insight.

The Chinese and Japanese Zen people were clear about the relationship of the poet to these lines. They would not say, "We use a lot of lines from the poetry of Du Fu because Du Fu was a fully realized Buddha." They might say, "Poets do better than they know, and their lines express truths or insights that they perhaps have not fully actualized in themselves. Because that's the nature of art. We can see it and use it for ourselves as we like." They also do say that Du Fu, in the realm of poetry, is a poet Buddha. In the realm of poetry.

Mr. Shigematsu translated a gathering of these quotations in his book Zen Forest, sayings of the Masters. These are some selections from the poems in that collection then—

The cold water waits for spring,
The ice is thinning.
Dawn mountains meet a clear sky,
The snowy peaks soar.

Wild geese have no mind
To leave traces.
Water does not intend
To reflect shadows.

Need fire?
Best strike a flint.
Need water?
Dig a well.

And some of them are proverbs or folk sayings as well, mixed together with poetry. You get both folk proverbs and poems in this anthology. Both are used in response to koan study.

Climb barefoot a mountain of swords.
Enter a fire wearing furs.

A rabbit conceives
and bears a tiger.

Vomit out the wild fox spit,
Swallow again the fresh spirit.

Peonies, scarlet all day.
People of the walled city get drunk.

That's a little sample of what's in the in-house tradition of the use of poetry in Rinzai Zen.

A little further on in the course, the priests are called on to write their own poems—not immediately. Not young monks. Although younger Zen students, if they feel like it, will write poems and exchange poems with each other. It becomes obligatory when you finish Zen practice under a teacher. The very last thing you do in the Rinzai tradition to receive the final approval of your teacher, your last assignment, is to write a poem. He says, "And now you've done all the koans, you understand the precepts, you've mastered the five ranks, you've gone through the Zen style I Ching studies, and now one more thing—you have a good character, you've paid your taxes—

Write a poem!" That's the enlightenment poem, that the teacher then approves, accepts, or maybe says, "Acccch—terrible! Do it again!" Until you write a poem he accepts. You can become a Roshi and get inka.

Then if you are a Roshi (or temple priest)—this is all within the traditional world—people expect you to write poems. If you have a patron who's in the Osaka shipping business and is bringing back lots of wares from China and giving you money to rebuild a temple, you must do something for him. You might write a poem for him in calligraphy, put your seal on it. That's worth a huge donation. Poetry becomes part of daily life, the administrative and aesthetic world of Zen priests.

There's also the death poem. If you can possibly manage it, when you're on your death bed, you're going to write your final poem. Some priests manage to write three or four death poems. So then they say, well this is his last death poem. Now those poems—the enlightenment poems, the death poems, and the "Zen exchange" poems—have a distinctive flavor of their own. There is a tone and language that instantly identifies it as a Zen poem. But also some of the finest of these men, these teachers, ventured out of writing "Zen flavor" poems and wrote poems that belong to the mainstream tradition. That's where an interesting exchange takes place. Because you see, particularly in early T'ang, the great T'ang poets, the poets of the golden age of T'ang poetry—Wang Wei, Du Fu, Li Po, Liu Tsung-yuan, Po Chü-i, a number of them—are exchanging poems with Zen priest acquaintances. They all know each other. A lot of them know each other very intimately. Po Chü-i was a Zen student in the second generation from Ma Tsu, while he was also a government administrator. These men are virtually the best known poets in Chinese history. Their poems were circulating around, in

and out of the Zen world. The aesthetic that is going back and forth between the two is that a kind of elegant plainness or ordinariness be appreciated. To be understood more clearly by Buddhists it should be referred to as thusness, as tathata.

All is actuality. There is nothing special about actuality because it is all right here. There's no need to call attention, to bring it up vividly. Therefore the subject matter of poetry is profoundly ordinary. And the understanding of this went out from the Zen world and into the world of the T'ang Dynasty poets, so they strove to write profoundly ordinary poems at least once in a while. In the hierarchy of value the later Chinese critics themselves would say, well, the nature poems are lovely. The poems that make reference to Buddhism and Zen, they're nice too. But those two categories, they still have a trace of a stink. The really fine poems are the invisible ones, that show no special insight, no remarkable beauty.

No one ever really achieved writing poems that had no insight and beauty. But let me read one or two poems that are considered to have some of those qualities. This by Chao Chang Chih, student of Su Shih, called "Night Journey."

Old now, I care less and less about success.
On a lean horse I travel the long road alone.
Dawn comes to the lonely village
But a lamp still burns.
I know that there is a house
Where someone reads all night.

Or Su Shih's poem "Spring Night," a quatrain.

A spring night,
one hour worth a thousand gold coins.

The clear scent of flowers,
the shadowy moon.
Songs and flute upstairs—
threads of sound—
And in the garden,
a swing,
where night is still and deep.

So you see, the stillness of the swing, not moving, hanging in the middle of the night. Or a poem by Du Fu, "Clear Evening after Rain."

The sun sinks toward the horizon.
The light clouds are blown away.
A rainbow shines on the river.
The last raindrops spatter the rocks.
Cranes and herons soar in the sky,
Fat bears' feet along the banks.
I wait here for the west wind
And enjoy the crescent moon
Shining through the misty bamboo.

And, "Anonymous" from the late T'ang. This is very explicit.

What our eyes see
is ordinary—
it does not frighten people
but it always remains.
Like the moonlight on the chilled window—
even in the middle of the night
it shines on the thatched cottages.

One more, a quatrain. This is by Wang Wei. It is a favorite of the Zen world. But he didn't write it to be a Zen poem.

Empty mountains:
no one to be seen,
Yet—hear—
human sounds and echoes.
Returning sunlight
enters the dark woods;
Again shining
on green moss, above.

That's the flavor. The little silence in there. There has been a coevolution of poetry and Zen practice in the Chinese world which then went on to Japan. The story continues with the flowering of haiku—Basho and his school doing very much the same thing in the 18th century. There are traces of that appreciation yet today in Japanese poetry. Traditional Chinese and Japanese poems are now in a very archaic language and are studied as classics in school, but rarely inspire a contemporary poet. Only in the world of Zen practicers are they taken as vital and alive.

ANDREW SCHELLING / POETRY AND BUDDHISM IN INDIA

When they first emerged in India, the early Buddhist communities took a wildly antagonistic attitude towards poetry. There was none of that easy fraternization between poetry and Buddhist practice which characterizes the Chinese world. Those first monks led very simple austere lives. They viewed poetry as a purely hedonistic pursuit. In fact, the Pali sutras, their first documents, dismiss all the arts as urbane distractions which only interfere with spiritual practices. Suffering and the illusory ensnarements of maya were what

concerned them. As for poetry, its musical enthusiasms seemed just one more snare.

For westerners bred on the sanctity of art, and especially for Americans drawn by Asian poetry into Buddhist practice, this hostility is at first pretty bewildering. If you go to any of the early Buddhist literature—Henry Clarke Warren's Buddhism in Translation is a good place to look—this oppositional stance towards art produces some enchanting contradictions. Buddha will be seated on Vulture Peak or some other site of power in the ancient Buddhist world. He is surrounded by a vast assembly of monks, nuns, animals, celestial beings, gods, ghosts, sprites, humans, and so forth, sermonizing on how the true traveller of the Way avoids, as if it were poison, listening to music. You must flee poetry, he says, as though it will cast you into vicious hell; you don't play around with dancing girls, you don't burn incense, you don't loaf and enjoy the flowers. How can you enjoy any of these things when the human condition, properly understood, is like sitting in a burning house? Art may hide but it also fans the flames. He's quite serious about this, and gives very convincing arguments. But when he finishes his talk and his audience sits silent, the words still echoing in their ears, the heavens magnificently open. Flowers rain from the sky, incense billows in huge clouds from clefts in the earth, divine musicians seated on rainbows break forth with heavenly music, and in all directions fabulous dancing girls appear. It's like a Grateful Dead concert!

What's more, the whole description's written in verse.

So this is the contradiction. India has always excelled in dance, in poetry, in music, in sculpture. Nobody could for

very long conceive any aspect of life, especially spiritual endeavors, apart from art. They'd always been fused in the popular imagination. Yet a strict asceticism governed the early Buddhists.

Now in India there's a longstanding distinction between verse and poetry. India has a very old, very elaborate oral tradition, and virtually everything worth remembering got committed to verse over the years because writing came into India surprisingly late. The words of Buddha didn't even get written down until 80 A.D. which is five hundred years after his death. For thousands of years the full cultural lore of India was fixed in verse, and scholars and poets devised terrifically sophisticated means for memorizing huge quantities of metrical literature. Eventually, because of all this metric oral material, a distinction arose between high-culture poetry—what was called kavya—and the verse forms of epic, or scientific, or liturgical literature. These might be called by any of a number of descriptive names, shloka or gatha or something. These are just names of particular metric patterns.

The Buddhist communities had numerous gathas—verses recited at meals, funerals, holidays, and so on. Poetry kept slipping through the back door through these recitations. The monks also used practical mental honing devices to remind themselves how seriously certain activities such as eating should be regarded. This tradition still functions in American Zen centers during sesshin. Before a meal someone formally calls out, "Monks, I beg you to remember, life and death are serious matters." Nothing extravagant or metaphysical. Those early communities were admirably straightforward.

Yet despite the enjoinders against art, the oldest lyric poetry from India may have developed within Buddhist communities. At least nothing earlier has come down to us. Monks and nuns of the time, when they weren't wandering, gathered in small contemplative groups, sometimes in city parks, but often in quite isolated places—undisturbed jungle retreats, or caves high in the mountains. These people owned nothing except their robes, begging bowls, and a razor. Very austere lifestyles, no frills of any sort. Certainly no musical instruments. But they did begin to produce some good poetry. There are two collections, one called Theragatha or "Songs of the Monks," the other called Therigatha, or "Songs of the Nuns."

They justified their poems by claiming that they were intended as inspiration, to draw others onto the Buddhist path. There is an old parable about coating medicine with sugar which has often been applied to the sacred arts in India. And a well-known talk of the Buddha describes a man who comes home to find his house on fire and his children trapped inside. The children are too young to recognize the danger, and the man can't get past the flames to rescue them, so he sets brightly colored toys out on his front lawn and lures them out of the doomed house. Buddhists eventually invoked this parable to sanction the composition of poetry.

The metrics of the songs of the monks and nuns are pretty simple, drawn from folk sources like the epic, which had a long historical tradition throughout Asia. But some of the Buddhist songs show surprising literary polish. The shorter ones describe the joys of contemplative life in wild, lonely, natural settings—forests, mountains, wildlife, waterfalls. But the most interesting songs are longer and follow a ballad-like narrative pattern. They tell why the poet has renounced the world and adopted the Buddhist teachings.

Some give a detailed account of the poet's life prior to entering the order—love affairs, marriage, children, village activities, wealth, success. But like an Anglo-Saxon ballad they mount with swift inevitability upon calamity, some dreadful crisis which strips the poet of everything. Their children die; their village is swept away by flood; bandits wipe out their families. This is the most convincing reason to give up the world—the world will be torn from you anyhow, in the most painful manner.

So the tone of these poems is wistful, nostalgic, hurt. But in the end thay are also strangely joyful, because a moment of triumph and personal empowerment emerges at the high point of the poem. In the wake of tragedy comes unsurpassable insight. It is not just personal bad luck that has humbled the poet—life itself is painful and impermanent. Any other belief is vanity, a tenacious clinging to unreality. So comes the great turning away from the dream of this world. Buddhist poetry begins here.

A folk tradition of verse and prose storytelling was spreading through the lay Buddhist communities also. Here was a treasure trove of material drawn from a wide range of sources—paleolithic animal tales, folk songs, ghost stories, military epics. Some of this stuff congeals into the "Jataka Tales" or Stories of the Buddha's Previous Births. Many of the Jataka's are animal fables, a genre that travelled from India into Europe and is the source of Aesop's Fables, the Unicorn legend, various vampire stories. The Buddhist material is quite old however. And the tales are punctuated by little cryptic threads of verse which are far older than the story they occur in, older even than the Buddhist tradition. Nobody knows where they come from. They're part of the ancient folk poetry substratum.

Sadly, some of the most interesting of these old stories have been utterly expurgated in translation. You don't know it unless you compare the English versions with the originals. They have crazy erotic themes, vivid as Chaucer and just as funny. The Victorian scholars who translated them felt they should not be released to the public. They might fall into the hands of somebody not mature enough—women or children, working class people—anyone who wasn't a scholar. Sometimes they translated the explicit passages into Latin. That way only other scholars could read them. So when you read the old translations you occasionally come upon a hiatus or some simple phrase like "and then she seduced him," or a few pages of Latin. This is where sometimes pages of wonderful raunchy material has been deleted. I guess you have to consider that this process has been as mysterious and authentic as what got these wild sexy stories into the Buddhist tradition in the first place, considering how puritanical the original monks were.

But it is the songs of the community of monks and nuns, inverted in a curious way, which sets the tone for high-art poetry in India—the classical poems of Sanskrit. When I say inverted, I mean that what comes to be the distinguishing character of this poetry is not the triumph and grandeur of renunciation, but a delicious wistfulness over the fleeting quality of life. Nobody else except maybe the Japanese have a poetic tradition which so delicately and bravely celebrates impermanence. Think of the famous verse from the Diamond Sutra.

Like stars,
    a lantern,
a magic spectacle,
    dewdrops or a
        bubble,

Like a dream,
a streak of
lightning or a cloud—
so should you regard
the things of this
world.

The climax of the early Buddhist poem was this sort of cold-eyed insight. But the preceding narrative is the more interesting part of the poem, where the poet recounts the pleasures of her worldly life. This is what Sanskrit poetry concentrates on, both extolling the pleasures and acknowledging their disturbing insubstatiality.

The poets saw personal happiness as doomed. Still, it is love that determines a person's inward life, and the best poetry is calmly erotic. The poems have a bittersweet flavor, partly because the verse-forms are so short, so formal and so sharply edged. They resemble Indian miniature paintings. For all the vivid color they are yet so shy they seem a brushstroke painted across nothingness—a virtually transparent brushstroke, all texture and no substance. This is maya. Samsara. The tempest of existence. You suspect that if you blink your eye it will instantly vanish. As if the painter or the poet has tried desperately to get something down before the dream fades—a flash of tenderness, humor, mischief, desire, grief. The poems are formal gestures into the Void.

While Buddhism flowered in India, merchants and princes built enormous monastic universities for monks and scholars. Chinese pilgrims of the T'ang Dynasty coming in search of Buddhist texts have left descriptions of these calm, enlightened

centers of learning. Poets stayed in them too, but more frequently lived at the court of some royal patron as a paid artist. They were celebrated as "gems of the court." This could cause difficulties, not the least being the conflict which runs so deep through Indian culture between a sensual, life-celebrating existence, and a life subject to vows of voluntary poverty. There were inevitable clashes between fiery tempered poets and their patrons. This is a poem by Bhartrihari from the center of the fray.

You hold the bankroll,
but words
speed to my command,
just like that!
What you want
you get by brawling;
I speak
and cut pride
where it sits in a man's eye.
Mad for a few dollars
people debase themselves
to you but they
hanker to hear me
dispel their mental phlegm.
You don't give a
damn about me, King—
I care even less
for you. So I'll leave.

Bhartrihari spent his life flipflopping between the courts and the forests where he could retreat in solitude. He never resolved the clash between his powerful sexual urges and his longing for a simple bark-clad life in the forests.

Life at court, no matter how splendid, was always tainted by intimations of impermanence. Pleasures are like dewdrops

or flashes of lightning. I think this runs throughout the poetry. Even when it is explicitly erotic, lighthearted, careless, there's a taste of sadness that lingers afterwards. This poem addresses it directly.

Making love to her
lasts a flickering instant,
substantial as dream
or some sleight of magic.
Quickly it reaches
the disillusioning end.
A hundred times I think
back on this course,
unable to shake
her eyes from my memory.

Dharmakirti, who wrote that, may or may not be the famous Buddhist commentator of the same name. Nobody knows. This anonymous poem sounds strikingly contemporary:

I've never fastened
a bracelet
white like the
autumn moon's light
to my wrist.
Nor have I tasted
the pliant lip of a
young wife, trembling
with uncertainty.
I obtained no
reknown in the places
the gods inhabit,
by knowledge
or by swordsmanship,
but spent my days
in a squalid
university, among the

howling, impudent
students.

One poem strikes me as an especially unforgettable moment brushed across eternity—like Keats's urn. It is anonymous.

This time let me
be the lady
you play the lover—

to which the girl
protests
shaking her head

but eyes
wide as a deer's
eyes she threads
a bracelet onto
his wrist.

Or this, by a famous playwrite, Bhavabhuti.

Critics scoff
at my work
and declare their contempt—
no doubt they've got
their own little wisdom.
I write nothing for them.
But because time is
endless and our planet
vast, I write these
poems for a person
who will one day be born
with my sort of heart.

The word in the poem, sahridaya, literally means "a person with heart." These are the ones who truly understand poetry.

Love of poetry isn't just some inborn quality but a carefully cultivated sensibility. Indian aesthetics insisted that reading or listening to poetry requires as much work as writing it. You trained yourself for hearing poetry—trained your heart—in much the same way you train yourself to write it. This meant knowing the many phases of love, especially the heartaches. The poetess Vidya:

And what of those
arbors of vines
that grow where the river
drops away from Kalinda Mountain?
They conspired in the love
games of cowgirls
and watched over the veiled
affairs of Radha.
Now that the days
are gone when I cut their
tendrils, and laid them
down for couches of love,
I wonder if they've
grown brittle and if
their splendid blue flowers
have dried up.

One final poem. I think this is a description of dhyana—zazen—meditation. On the surface it sounds surprisingly Chinese. But the identification with the elephants is heartrendingly Indian. It goes directly back to the most ancient sources, back behind the Jataka Tales.

Rain slants steadily
through the night-bound
toddy forest. Concealed
by huge palm fronds
the elephants, eyes

half open and trunks
slung over their tusk-tips
listen to the continuous
downpour.

That's by Hastipaka. Poets and scholars in north India anthologized many of these poems at the Buddhist universities. When Turkish moslems stormed across India in the 11th and 12th centuries they targeted these centers of learning and destroyed them. It was a brutal period and spelled the end of Buddhism in India. Countless manuscripts probably got lost or burnt. Those that survived sometimes turn up in monasteries in Nepal where escaping Buddhist scholars fled.

But in some sense the poets must have been prepared for the holocaust. Not just people, but civilizations live and die too. Even ones that have lasted 1000 years.

Like a dream,
a streak of
lightning or a cloud—

Poetry sounded like this in Buddhist India.

ANNE WALDMAN / THE POETRIES OF TIBET

I thought I'd read from the collection The Rain of Wisdom. It's complete title is "The Essence of the Ocean of True Meaning Bringing the Rain of Wisdom, the Spontaneous

Self-Liberation, The Blazing Great Bliss, the Quick Path to Realization of the Supreme Siddhi, the Vajra Songs of the Kargyu Gurus." This collection represents a 900 year tradition. The Mahasiddhas of India actually composed these teachings through songs, which were called dohas. They were composed in the popular style of the period. There's a complex esoteric symbolism which relates to the particular teaching, the Vajrayana teaching. And yet there's an incredible immediacy of expression, and spontaneity rather than originality. It's more about what is going on in the moment, and you might be drawing on what you just understood in terms of the particular teaching and realization. So it's a way to communicate your experience of understanding and realization in the most direct and spontaneous way possible, rather than trying to be an original poet. You might be echoing your teacher, using words from your own teacher or the teacher before him or her, and so on.

The lineage, the Kargyu lineage, begins with Vajradhara who is a sambhogakaya manifestation, not a literal or historical figure. And the two yidams of the lineage are Chakrasamvara and Vajrayogini, and then from there you start with the historical Tilopa who lived in 988. This collection then goes up to the present time. Maybe some of you have heard of the sixteenth Gyalwang Karmapa. His songs are in this book, as well as some dohas by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the Tibetan Kargyu lama who died recently—this last Saturday (April 4, 1987). I thought I'd just read a few words from his introduction.

He says here, "The essence of all these songs can be epitomized by the four Dharmas of Gampopa." Gampopa was the student of Milarepa. These sort of sum up the essence of the songs. "These are 1) one's mind becomes dharmic. 2) that dharma practice becomes path. 3) in following that

path confusion is removed. And 4) having removed confusion everything dawns as wisdom."

He goes on to say, "The first dharma is the ground where our minds become dharmic, so that we and the dharma are no longer separate entities. We develop true renunciation and have a sense of revulsion towards samsara. The second dharma is the path. When our mind goes along with the dharma, the dharma becomes path and any obstacles, whether extreme or ordinary, become a part of our journey. The third dharma is fruition. As the journey is taking place, the process of the journey liberates us from confusion and anxiety. We are delighted by our journey and we feel it is good. The fourth dharma is the total vision. When we are able to overcome our confusion and anxiety, even our anxiety is not regarded as anti-dharma or anti-path. And therefore cosmic wakefulness takes place."

Now I thought I'd read part of a song by Milarepa. He's probably the most famous Tibetan poet. Maybe some of you have heard of The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa? He lived from 1040 to 1123 A.D. This is in the common form of a dialogue, between teacher or guru, and student or disciple. It was a way of teaching. The teachings, the dohas, are very connected to devotion to one's guru. In that sense there's a focus, honoring and often invoking the life and teachings of the guru. So this is a dialogue between Milarepa and a young woman, Paldarbum. The text says:

> With great faith the maiden touched his feet. She invited him in and offered him good hospitality. She requested meditation instruction and offered this supplication.

There are these little prose parts—almost directions. Then the text breaks into song. I think this resonates with the

early folk drama narratives. There'd be a narrative story of a particular journey, almost shamanistic. For example, there's the famous Tibetan story of Nangsa Obum, which resembles a traditional shaman's journey, such as the classic anonymous Sumerian Inanna myth. The initiate endures all kinds of hardships. Goes to hell and back, so to speak. Is torn apart, comes back to life. Is transformed. In the case of the folk-tale heroine Nangsa Obum, she is married against her will, escapes to practice Dharma, parts from her son (in one of the most moving dialogues between mother and son I've ever encountered), dies and comes back to tell her story, thus manifesting her faith and devotion in the precious Dharma. Likewise Inanna, in another culture, also endures fierce encounters and manifests the complete goddess cycle from prepubescent virgin to mother to old hag. These narratives are wonderful stories as well as instructive to the persons studying and being initiated into a particular sacred tradition. When the emotion is intense in the story, the narrative breaks into song, into poetry. At one point Nangsa Obum's mother is advising her to be a housewife and Nangsa replies passionately:

> When the sun stops shining I will stop desiring to practice the Dharma, and stay at home.
> If the sun keeps going,
> I will go also, to the Dharma.
> If the moon stops waxing and waning,
> I will stay at home.
> But if it does continue to wax and wane, I will go to the Dharma.
> If the lotus flower stops blooming in the summer,
> And dying in the winter,
> I will stay at home and not practice the Dharma
> But if it continues I will not stay at home.

In the case of Milarepa and his teaching to the young lady Paldarbum whom he has met at a fair, the hearer is meant to

experience the same kind of transformation and inspiration the young woman does. She herself becomes a "wonderful yogini, holder of the hearing lineage." He instructs her at one point:

Look up into the sky,
And practice meditation free from fringe and center.

Look up at the sun and moon,
And practice meditation free from bright and dim.

Look over at the mountains,
And practice meditation free from departing and changing.

Look down at the lake,
And practice meditation free from waves.

Look here at your mind,
And practice meditation free from discursive thought.

The lady then, after meditating, offers an examination of her own experience of sun and moon and sky, mountains, lake and her own mind:

I am able to meditate on the sky;
But when clouds arise, how should I meditate?

I am able to meditate on the sun and moon;
But when heavenly bodies move, how should I meditate?

And so on. Then Milarepa clarifies further.

If you are able to meditate on the sky
Clouds are manifestations of the sky.
Once more resolve this manifestation;
Once more resolve your mind.

If you are able to meditate on the sun and moon,
The stars and planets are manifestations of the sun and moon.
Once more resolve this manifestation;
Once more resolve your mind.

And finally in the last part of this section, he says:

Discursive thoughts are manifestations of your mind.
Once more examine the root of discursive thought;
Once more resolve your mind.

So the poetry, although confirmed in its resolution of purpose and often strong and passionate, is for the most part didactic in this tradition, and takes one very skillfully and deliberately through the proper Dharmic points and steps. The content—the specifics of the stories in the cases of Milarepa and Nangsa Obum—is often wild and outrageous. The form is more controlled. As I said earlier, one is not trying to be an original poet in the doha, but true to one's own realization as part of the lineage in this particular tradition.

It took me a while to get into the spirit of this form, being more attracted to the simplicity and succinctness of Japanese and Chinese meditative lyrics. And the ecstasy of Sanskrit poetry, or Persian, has always been more exciting to me personally.

Gary Snyder: There are some poems like that, like the doha, in early Chinese Zen too. Long ones like that.

Anne: Yes, the length seems necessary but tedious on some level. Reiteration of the same points. But as I started to practice, I felt these songs connected to my own experience

in my studies with the guru and the teachings.

Gary: These are teachings for people who don't read or write.

Anne: Exactly. I meant to say that these stories and songs come from a very active oral tradition.

Question: Were they chanted or was it just recited?

Anne: We read them in the Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies as both chant and narrative. We actually do these once a year. In this particular Kargyu lineage we celebrate Milarepa's birthday in the spring, and we read through the whole book The Rain of Wisdom. There's one reader who recites the narrative in a straight prosey way, and then we all join in and more or less chant the songs. So that might be somewhat the original idea. These of course are translations. Tibetan poetry often works with an eleven syllable line. And certain kinds of sound-rhyme, resonance. There's a great deal of repetition and refrain which comes through, even in translation.

Question: So it becomes almost mantra-like?

Anne: Well, mantra's different. Mantra's sort of pure sound, more than sense.

Question: The fact that it is repeated...?

Anne: Well, the dohas are telling stories of realization. One follows the events and action. Perhaps the refrains are to help the memory. These were originally oral teachings.

Joan Halifax: Anne, I've heard a number of Milarepa songs sung by Chang Tulku, and they're extremely melodic. It's not chanted—it's like a folk song. What you read right there would probably take him half an hour to sing because he's blissing all around. He's also gesturing, and there are these extraordinary pauses and long phrases and very complicated melodies. But folk melodies.

Anne: That's the tradition. It's more like theatre, literally. With gestures and storytelling in the dialogues. I'm not sure how the ritual evolved. At certain points there is an obvious group participation.

Joan: And also in Nepal. Some of the theatre I've seen there, the Tibetan theatre, where they also are singing songs. It's again, as Anne mentioned, an even more demonstrative form of theatre. But it's not the chant we're familiar with in the Tibetan tradition.

Gary Snyder: Japanese Noh drama too is another great poetical artistic expression of Buddhism—poetic drama of a very high order.

Joan: These theatre pieces that I saw in Tibet, they are not unlike Noh in the sense that they start about the same time in the morning and they end about the same time at night.

Gary: That's the way theatre is supposed to be.

Joan: And it's like a medieval setting. The audience is on three sides—there are two balconies around the court in a monastery.

Gary: And they take their time.

Joan: Do they! I mean, they're thirteen-act plays with two comedic interludes, one of which I've seen in two different monasteries and which lasts two and a half hours—an interaction between a pundit and someone else—it's a complete parody. But two and a half hours of this conversation, while these two guys are walking around. Everyone's screaming with laughter! But it's living Buddhism. Different from what we know in our own Buddhist frame of reference, because it's enjoyed by a folk people.

Gary: That kind of theatre's found all over China and Japan too.

Norman Fischer: Did it come from India originally?

Gary: Central Asia, India, everywhere.

Anne: I saw part of a thirty day Tibetan Buddhist ceremony in Darjeeling. It was a medicine-making ceremony, but it had elements of poetry and theatre, and lama dancing. The ceremony took place in a large room with the participants enacting various dualities, both wrathful and peaceful deities,

mandalas, terrifying masks meant to wake you up, and so on. And then a string or cord went around the whole room and into a smaller chamber where the monks were literally making the medicine. The wire went right to the shrine, and there were all these implements and ground up diamonds, and stones and monkey dung and you know, whatever, added into that potent developing medicine. And they were empowering these elements, the ingredients of the medicine, through this ritual enactment, for thirty days. It was extraordinary.

Andrew Schelling: Also, the monks who dance and perform this way are trained from a very early age. At the age of eight or nine when they go into the monastery very few are meditating. They're learning the dances and learning the songs. They don't actually begin to study meditation until much later.

Anne: Yes, that's considered an advanced practice. Shamatha vipashyana.

STEVE BENSON / ON COLLABORATION

I gave a talk about eleven weeks ago about collaboration, and the histories and traditions of collaboration in the Western world. Unfortunately I didn't bring my file cards and I don't have a very good memory so I'm not going to say much of anything factual about that. In fact, my perception of collaboration is that it's more of a non-tradition, something

that would spurt up in a given school or period; at a certain place suddenly you'd have a lot of people not only writing alone but also collaborating. It would happen, it seems to me, in places where a lot of work was circulating in manuscript, where a writing community was discovering both its sociality, and at the same time a possible language of exchange as an art language. In other words, a community in self-discovery, in self-generation.

An example would be Elizabethan England, as a time when there were a lot of collaborations—Marvel, Sidney, and others. One person would write a stanza and another person would write the next stanza. Or they'd write poems back and forth to each other, or collaborate on plays.

That happened at other periods also—the 1910s and 20s in Russia with the early Constructivists, where a whole language, zaum, z-a-u-m, was invented by certain individuals and collaboratively by groups of writers—ostensibly a nonsense language that wasn't meant to mean anything in particular, at least not that other people would understand. But books were written in this language, collaboratively as well as individually.

About the same time in Zurich the Dadaists did a good bit of collaboration, especially in cabaret performances. The Cabaret Voltaire was a tiny little hang-out in Zurich, started by one of them, and groups would put on variety shows of the most flamboyant and unpredictable nature, often designed to elicit an audience response of as violent a nature as possible. In Robert Motherwell's book Dada Painters and Poets there's one example of a very interesting script for collaborative performance that Tristan Tzara wrote in the form of

simultaneous poems in English, French and German. Three of the early Dadaists would perform this in wild and exuberant voices, standing in the middle of the stage after a brief bow to the audience. In the middle of it they'd break into the most loud and cacaphonous racket that they possibly could, on I forget what three instruments, but they were not very sophisticated ones.

Theirs was a very iconoclastic use of improvisation. But I would venture that that's often been the case, especially in modernist periods—that collaboration's been used to break up assumptions, to break up language, to break up patterns of both the production and reception of literature, and the performance of literature.

One other example. Shortly after the Dadaists, the French Surrealists, centered around Paris, invented automatic writing and the Exquisite Corpse as two fairly occult methods of working together. Those perhaps are especially good examples of getting rid of ego control in writing. Automatic writing was virtually a trance state where the writer was trying to evade any kind of personal responsibility for what the writing would be. If half of a book was by Breton, and the other half by Soupault, they didn't bother to sign who did what, because it was really all automatic writing. They just said, "this is our book, here it is."

The Exquisite Corpse was a formula for writing in which, I believe, whoever was writing a given line at the time was seeing only the previous line. The rest of the poem was masked by folding it under. So you'd have a series of linkages, each couplet within a block of blank verse that

wasn't recognizably in couplet form. Any isolated couplet would have a certain logic and continuity, wherever you cut it, but the whole stream of things wouldn't know where it was coming from or where it was going. So again, a way of losing any kind of deliberacy, any kind of ego control or "progressive" or tendentious guidance about what are we doing here, what is this for.

Closer to our period, I am most aware of the so-called New York School, in the 60s and 70s in particular, doing a lot of collaborative writing. Kenneth Koch, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, Jimmy Schuyler, and also the semi-generation afterwards including Anne Waldman, Ted Berrigan, etcetera etcetera. A lot of collaborative work and play with different forms of writing together, sitting down at the page or sending things through the mail.

General comments that I want to make: well, what is this? You know, what's the point? What is it for, writing in collaboration? Often things will wind up more out of control and therefore less likely to be published, or anthologized, or unforgettable, than poems that are written by one person maintaining all the guidances focused in one cohering orientation. Because in a collaboration the guidance is dispersed between two people. It may be traded off in different ways, and whether it's all going to be a group mind or whether it's going to be some sort of dynamic exchange between the two is usually up for grabs. What is leading and what is following, what's foregrounded and what's made subtle or subtextual, become harder to put your finger on. So it's something that tends to come up in a period when people are interested in experiment, where people are interested in the possibilities of risk and exchange, and in entertaining the unexpected. It's a good way of releasing

the initiatives of spontaneity, letting go of defences, letting go of what you're used to and what's typical. When you are sharing responsibility with someone else you can always say, "Well, they can't say that's my poem. It's his poem or her poem, too." So it's easier to take risks and open up to the unexpected in your own practice, in your own compositional initiatives. As well as to really listen, and to begin to get inside somebody else's writing mind. Which is a lot of fun and a great potential release.

Anne Waldman: Burroughs sometimes calls that "the third mind," which comes about through cut-up which is a kind of chance operation—through cutting up your own work or cutting it in with someone else's or working collaboratively. There's some kind of energy that seems to come in, or something emerges. You can blame it on the third mind! The uninvited guest!

Norman Fischer: This kind of practice, this approach to writing, is where I see these ideas all fitting together. For me, these kind of experiments, what I see coming out of an avant garde approach, seem very close to the ideal, or to one of the main points, in our life of practice and meditation. Which is that we see this habitual "self" or tendency we have, and we notice that for a long time when we write that's what comes up. That's what we're writing about—"I feel this, I think that, this is my life, this is my wish, my hope, my desire." Then if you try to find a way to write outside of that, a way to practice some kind of clarity or awareness that is a step removed from that, all of a sudden you look over at this tradition of collaboration and the various techniques for messing up the stream of thought. There's a big connection there—do you know what I mean? The whole issue of the self in writing, which is certainly an issue in Buddhist

practice, becomes forefronted in this work. I think there's a big connection—and a lot of useful approaches coming up in this kind of method. That is how it all hangs together for me, this work that we are doing now, and this ancient traditional material that we're bringing up at the same time.

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Additional Writings: The Poetics of Emptiness

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THE FULNESS OF SILENCE

for Althea
who will dance one day

Hakuin need not applaud me with his one hand—I have discovered the applause of every leaf on every tree as immense a congregation as ever I could join and so too my heart beats.

so others also
hear in Shinoda fields at
temple twilight snow

or how one assumes a name—
finds words out.

The first week—thirty years ago—I was in Kyoto, sitting in Yamada's Gallery on Shinmonzen-dori, where it still is, where I sat virtually every day for years. A small yellowed scroll inscribed with thin wash of ink—words and figure—was hanging facing me. Yamada-san had just purchased it for 10.000 yen from some young man, who had taken it from the family kura in need of immediate cash. That was a fair sum of money then (my monthly income as a university teacher was 14.000 yen—to give you a scale of an idea). I had no idea what the image or writing "meant", nor, in fact, did Yamada-san, beyond the image being a dharma-figure. Done in a single trembling stroke of the brush. But the simple throwaway brio of the work, the fact that it had obviously been folded in quarters once (likely tucked in a kimono sleeve), tickled me, drew me. And though I was, as always, broke, I purchased the piece from my dealer-friend (he became a close friend) at once, though it took me 6 months (priced at 24.000 yen) to pay for it.

I have lived with it since. And though it isn't hanging in this cluttered house, the very model of emptiness indeed, it hangs clearly always in the emptiness within me. Its poetry—a poem Hakuin wrote as an acolyte at a temple near Osaka before he was 30—you can read in my version above. But the calligraphy itself, in all probability was done in the last year of his life—decades later. Someone had undoubtedly come to him and asked for some token of his life by which he, the other, might live. The name Hakuin—white (pure) sound—came with the poem.

That same first week in Kyoto I was introduced, through the good offices of my friend (new then) Will Petersen, to the Kawamura Noh Stage. It was one of those pivotal moments in life. The stage, school, home, was empty. A modest

theatre. No marquee. No names in lights. And the emptiness of the place allowed me to see the exact dimensions, the polished square, the audience to be seated on tatami at the same level. No spotlights—no dark spaces—everything clear. To the right the porch for the chorus with its low railing—to the left the bridgeway slanting off to the multistriped small curtain, the three small pines of time. And on the naked wood at the back of the stage, painted, the old pine from Kasuga, as unrealistic as an actual pine at a shrine.

I—who had dreamt of a theatre of realization for a long time—now beheld that theatre. And was spellbound. Even before I saw a single dance or play I knew this was my theatre. This was the poem, the music, the drama, the faith. Precisely this silence, this emptiness. This nakedness.

I was excited and still. As I still am.

I don't need to go back there. The old father, Roh-sensei, beard-sensei, who never, as an upstart, was permitted to act, who only sang, with a face like an Okina-mask but graver, longer, was beautiful. He showed me, backstage, how the masks worked, how the indifferent onna-mask, the classic white female face, changed expression at the slightest tilt or shift, and how carefully the countenance had to be balanced, like the body lantern, the house on fire, the light within.

Lineaments. Yeats had the word. And let it possess him. And gave it away. Let it go.

And the last time I was at the stage it was for Roh-sensei's memorial service. As I waited in the long line to enter to pay my respects to the family the clear day suddenly was touched with spatter of rain—rainbowlike—or was it my imagination? There's so much always going on—have you noticed?

To reach an
empty
stage

(a
painted
evergreen

for
scenery)
and dance

as only
a ghost
can.

—Cid Corman
Utano
6 April 1988

A man getting on a bus carrying a huge sack of crushed cans he'd collected for a living barely get the garbage through the bus door—spilling the cans, the passengers who're the same as him make minute motion inside of them of beginning to get down and pick up the cans—decide not to move forward—and he does it.

Picks up the cans in the bus moving.

Their not moving.

Going by gutted area.

And the bus continuing.

Sitting—saying

Man he's only fifty then digs up at night the pipes the men from the sewage system had worked on to hook up to the sewage. The person who says this having looked out the window at the sewage men digging in a trench in the sheets of rain. And the man coming home there from work at night digging them up again that night in the rain finds only two pipes are hooked to it. She says that to them the next day so they come back and do it.

How could you know that, they say to her
and she says he dug them up.

—Leslie Scalapino

BUDDHISM AND POETIC PRACTICE: NEWLY SAYING THE ALREADY SAID

AN 'ATTACHED COMMENT' IN HONOR OF KEIJI NISHITANI

1.1. An "attached comment", I read in Nishitani, is a "pithy comment attached to the utterances of Zen masters or to passages from Sutras, meant to express in a free manner one's own appreciative interpretation." As neither theologian, nor philosopher, nor scientist, I am astonished as well as stunned by the immense spiral staircase thrown over the void. I apprehend, if only dimly, the immeasurable importance of Religion & Nothingness but I despair of ever beginning to do it justice. I can see that by engaging with the language of the West, it brings about a situation in which we here no longer have the slightest excuse to avoid consideration of the serene majesty of twenty five hundred years of Eastern philosophy. Each in our own way we must wrestle with it. This "attached comment" then bears the subscription: written by the lowest, youngest and most ignorant of all possible listeners in homage to a master.

1.2. At first sight, I tell myself, this book seems to be made of words. Perhaps I was asked to talk, I continue, because my vocation is to deal with words—but I am aware that the poet's vocation in our culture is a residual one and no longer as highly prized as it once was. Now the way a poet deals with words is he or she takes them after everyone else has finished with them, when all the use has been gotten out of them—by theologians, philosophers, scientists and so forth—and he makes them into his toys. Perhaps he has the hope that, used by so many now, words may have recovered a sort of renewed innocence. They are playthings now, toys if you will, to be used for their own sake, without

any utilitarian motive whatsoever. The poet seems to be less of a hero than a fool because he tries to do something valuable with words when all the value has been drawn out of them, when they are at their most reduced and reductive. But it has been my habit to think of reality this way: as what is left after everyone else has had his ploy and his play and has gone home for the day. Then the poets, like ants or termites, worry at words in the dark. In the preface to Lyrical Ballads, Wordsworth, still writing early enough in the 19th century to retain some optimism about the brave and complex new world evolving all around him, presented the poet as the most available human being, available to what is important to us all when we have done being theologians, philosophers or scientists and are simply human creatures. This may be our leave to take poetic play as representative of all "construction of reality" at its most disinterested—if disinterest is still a possibility in this fallen world. The being-at-doing so graphically described by Nishitani is most purely and most unarguably the poet moving from verse to verse and from poem to poem. Thus I console myself.

1.3. Poets worrying at words in the dark. It had always seemed to me that words, when traced to their uttermost origins, had to be accepted as arising out of an unspeakably mysterious depth to which I ascribed apparently negative characteristics: darkness, incommunicability, silence, death. Or I would call the depth "The Great Silence." The most interesting characteristic of the mystery was that the more deeply and unimpededly one listened to the voice welling up from this primordial silence, the more this voice appeared to exhibit general characteristics, the more it appeared to be the collective human voice rather than the individual voice of the poet. But this was a matter of trust or faith. I could do nothing to explain the conviction that, blessedly, something beyond one's insignificant subjectivity

could be called into being in our vocation of listening to the voice while staying at home and playing, with nothing in particular to do.

2.1. Now, put in its simplest and most innocent form, the way categories of opposition appear to be exploded in Nishitani is that, under whatever ground can be known and named, an underground opens up which is the real ground and subsumes all the apparent contradictions in previous formulations, resolving them by allowing them to live in deeper, more harmonious co-existence. I sense, while reading, that wisdom may appear when all the grounds and undergrounds—even unto the "real ground"—finally explode but I cannot pretend to know the way home yet. So let me stay for a time with what now appears to me to subsume the unspeakably mysterious depth I had conceived of before.

2.2. I was asking before whether the ground of poetry does not seem to be silence, out of which mysteriously arises what appears to be an individual voice.

I ask now whether there may not be a deeper ground still and whether this ground may not be voice again but, this time, collective.

Collective because it is the voice of all things, both human and non-human and even other than both human and non-human, as they truly are, as they undifferentiatedly are on their own home-ground of all grounds as we might now have license to say: the void-voice or universal mantra if you will.

I ask further, if we are to follow Nishitani, whether this void-voice is not also the noise of the world that we hear immediately around us, that noise to which we used to try to add our own poems in an effort to insert our art into the world of nature or give our art objects the status and authenticity of objects in nature.

In that case, however, we would have to question what the silence is from which our poems appeared to us previously to arise whereas now they arise out of the void-voice once they have pierced this undercoating or underlayer of silence.

Perhaps the silence is the illusion we have that our poems come from some distant realm—some far side as Nishitani might call it. Perhaps the silence is the illusion that we have something to do, tasks to perform, difficulties to overcome, when we write poems—since we appear to have to create some kind of noise out of a nihilum we call silence and that this seems to be hard work rather than the play I spoke of playfully before.

Perhaps the silence we appear to have to wrest the poem from is the illusion not only that the poem is being wrested from something but that it is we who are wresting it.

2.3. Does this mean that this silence is intolerable? That the chains of this silence are intolerable? Yes, yes, it means that the chains of the poetic condition are intolerable. And that we are born free, free not to work but to play? Yes, free, and already here, with nowhere else to go. Nowhere to go. And I who had been thinking all my life that I had to run somewhere, to get to somewhere! Where is that there which has always been here? And, if it has always been here, how can it be a where or a there?

Likewise: I have been constantly impelled by the practice of poetry to produce something that appears to need to be said. It appears to be rising inside me out of some unfathomable silence in a hungry need to be said outside of me, to be placed out there—as if the answer could somehow survive the question! When it has come out, however, and stands out there, it always seems, to my impatient and vengeful ears and eyes, to be something that has already been said, that is: "said" in the sense in which I have used

the expression "it is here" or "I am here."

But to stay with the moment of saying a while longer: what I say, as I say it, never seems to be the already said but that which needs to be said. If it were not for that illusion at the moment of saying, I might be misled into giving up the attempt to say anything at all. If it were not for that illusion which arises out of the unfathomable silence from which that which has to be said appears to have to be wrested. Are these not the "chains" of the poetic condition: that we have to pass through the promise of saying what appears to need saying only to find before us the harvest of last year's wheat or corn? Why can we not reach the already said immediately without all this suffering through saying?

In some sense, then, the "said" or "already said" seems to be an unattainable because we cannot attune ourselves to the idea that the poem has already been written before we began to write. And we might then ask: if the poem is already written, what use have I for myself and in what sense would it not be better for me to put an end to my life in poetry, to throw myself away and to die?

Now if years ago—without knowing what I was saying then—I put into print the view that "poetry is the religion of language," perhaps I can now ask not only "what is the purpose of religion for us? why do we need it?" but also: "what is the purpose of devotion to poetry? why do we need it?" and humbly disagree with Nishitani only to this extent—that, on the first page of his book, "learning and the arts... can be considered a kind of luxury".

3.1. If we follow Nishitani to the possibility of saying that, because there is a ground which is wider than time and space, the existence of time and space is grounded in that ground and the possibility of the uniqueness of every single thing truly exists, then perhaps we can ask a few more questions regarding the need to newly say the already said.

I have long thought that, from the point of view of production, we need at least three aesthetics: the aesthetics of the individual poem; the aesthetic of all the poems that any poet writes in his or her lifetime (the aesthetics of opus) and the aesthetic of all possible poems or possibilities of poetry (the aesthetics of page or text). The life of a poet is an interminable conversation with these three aesthetics, all conversing with each other at the same time as he is conversing with each in turn. It is this multi-stranded and multi-levelled conversation that gives the poet some illusion of operating within the widest available time-frame: that of his own each-and-every act in poetry; that of his life's work in poetry and that of his life's work in poetry in relation to all other lives in poetry, past, present and to come. In particular, it has seemed to me that the sense of opus has not been sufficiently attended to in the aesthetics of reception and that, properly looked into, it would yield clues to critics about a certain kind of foreknowledge frequently found in a poet's individual act in poetry. Things appear to happen as if the poet knew, well before a poem, that he would write that poem, or as if he knew that one poem would, perhaps much later, call another into being. Whence, also, the apparently mysterious experience of destroying certain lines or certain poems and finding them reappear many years later in another context altogether—as if nothing could in fact be destroyed, as if time, for the poet, were an illusion that could be dispensed with. Talk current since the "death of God" that art is now our religion and the poet its priest often hinges on such apparently "magical" or "shamanistic" possibilities within a poet's experience.

3.2. Following Nishitani onto the greater ground beneath all grounds for whatever is ever said may allow us some insight into the question of how it appears that something needs to be said when, in fact, it always reveals itself when once said as

the "already said." If the widest possible circle of Nishitani's ground of grounds contains within it the simultaneous arising and ceasing of everything and anything that is to be said, whether by the human voice or the voice of all other sentient and non-sentient beings (the rocks and trees that heard Orpheus and were heard by him as well as gods, demi-gods, heroes, ghosts and animals) any act of true listening in the always-here cannot but catch echoes of what has been and what is to be as well as what is. In particular, the manifesting of the voices of the dead has always been one of the deepest responsibilities of the poet, wherever the dead are or whatever they are on their way to. In the place where all things that have been, are and are to be, speak together, the poet's effort, always one to strain most purely against the illusion of primordial silence in the act of listening to the one, choral voice, cannot but catch echoes of the true discourse behind the contradictory static set up by myriads of individual voices in the contentiousness of noising abroad the myriad selves. The difficulty of saying anything "new" in poetry arises out of the difficulty of conjugating what is said by the myriad selves with the harmony of the void-voice, of conjugating that which is said all around us with the one deep sound of the world-mantra. The miracle of exquisite balance, the guarantee that this has to be attempted, is that we are occasionally granted—perhaps once in a lifetime—the true poem, the poem which sounds and looks exactly right, the poem which is both new-born and immeasurably ancient, the masterpiece. The masterpiece arises when the myriad voices and the one deep sound are heard as one identical voice and there is no difference between the clash of battle cries and the universal hymn of peace.

3.3. Religion & Nothingness is a masterpiece of almost overwhelming proportions built in the clearing where the human city is menaced as it has never been before by the

clash of dissidence and nihilistic despair. The form which this crisis has taken in poetry bears the selfsame stamp of the Reign of Quantity as that which afflicts all other deep-sounding human activities. Today, in innumerable writing schools which affect to bypass the living of a life, every student carries in his or her backpack the baton of Emperor of the Poets and is more likely to try to use it than not. Apprenticeship is virtually dead; the market alone survives. The contenders enter the field with the greatest conceivable ease and begin at once sounding off their individual pipes and drums according to the latest mode in martial music. The fratricidal nature of the ensuing carnage—with individual liberties at their most naked, stark and poignant—is blatantly visible to all, yet rarely alluded to. The contenders fight for the ears and eyes of a group of listeners which gets smaller and smaller by the year—our culture having reached the point where the only people who read, record, review, publish and diffuse poetry are poets themselves; the reader, gentle or not, being as extinct as the dodo. Quality is drowned by quantity and literally cannot find any foothold in the ever-narrowing world. Small world or not, this world of poets—and I have indicated that I hold no great illusions as to its present scope—faces a scandal of unbelievable proportions: one in which <u>everyone</u> wants to sing and <u>no one</u> wants to listen to the song: the will-to-will at its most abhorrent and grotesque.

And then we ask: "What is poetry?"; "What is the purpose of poetry for us? Why do we need it?" And it seems that we only need it in order to shout louder ourselves in the evermore deafening clamor made by everyone else.

If this were not in the image of many other human enterprises of possibly deeper import, I would not have troubled you with mention of it.

4.1. I have tried to suggest that there is another way of

viewing and going about our life if we are to avoid destroying poetry as we are to avoid destroying our human universe. Nishitani has given us an awesome demonstration of the fact that "only on the field of emptiness does all this become possible. Unless the thoughts and deeds of man one and all be located on such a field, the sorts of problems that beset humanity have no chance of every really being solved." We must learn the archetypal action of non-action, the non-coercive sourcing, the gentle, spiral circling of the adamantine hawk. We need patience, immeasurable patience, if we are to hear the sound of "that which is spread out under all the things of the world."

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—Nathaniel Tarn

A ZEN HARVEST, Translated by Soiku Shigematsu. North Point Press, San Francisco, 1988.

In his forward to Shigematsu's second collection of practice-oriented Dharma song, Robert Aitken-Roshi tells us that "There is no concept or archetype in Zen Buddhism that does not self-destruct"—all is provisional. The reader of Shigematsu's collection delights in Zen themes and feels at home with old Taoist voices, but, rest unassured, there will be no fixed abode. The poem grasping for permanence is disrupted, toyed with, teased, or complemented by its fellows. These poems take the Mind all over, though they do it with the friendliness and generosity that makes everywhere a home.

In his introduction to the collection, Mr. Shigematsu discusses the uses of the poetry manual for Zen monks, explains the Japanese forms (haiku, dodoitsu, waka) and introduces us to four major thrusts of Zen poetry: Zen individualism, universalism, vitalism, and ecology. These categories provide a fruitful way in which to understand paradox and contradiction as they arise in Zen poetry, for a short verse expressing ineluctable individuality (or "Eternal Loneliness" as discussed by D. T. Suzuki) will often follow on the heels of an assertion of our universal nature. Though he relates the poems to weighty philosophical issues, Shigematsu moves with utter freedom and lightness, showing us how to write through Zen even while writing about it. Other Zen authorities have teased the existentialists for making a (Self-confirming) fetish of the Void, but none with Shigematsu's spriteliness:

How odd T.S. Eliot's Prufrock is! "Do I dare?"

"Do I dare?" Why hesitate? What is the self you cling to so anxiously, Prufrock?

This very bearable lightness of being is perhaps the most appropriate advertisement to the poets, plumbers, and philosophers who will read A Zen Harvest in English.

Some themes running through the collection illustrate this sense of freedom. The lovesongs, or dodoitsu, Shigematsu tells us, were probably written with "no Zen intention at all." How appropriate that they express Zen.

Hey, Miss Mount Fuji,
Why don't you take off those
Robes of mist?
Wish I could see
Your snow-white skin! (133)

My hair curled elaborately
Only for your sake;
It's you who will
Disturb it at midnight. (134)

Each poem by itself sings a lovesong to enlightenment, but in tandem they express Dharma's genderlessness.

Ordinariness is another theme. Not confined by black robes and monastery walls, these poems live in the world of bill collectors, happy insects, and horse farts:

Zen monk's way goes on
Barrier after barrier,
Like the fifty-three
Stations on the old highway:
As many as horses' farts. (33)

To put the matter another way,

Dewdrops show up
Indiscriminately:
Any place will do. (318)

The Moon in a dewdrop has old friends among readers of Dogen; it is like the aforementioned themes in its refusal to rest in a set meaning. The poems on moons and dewdrops make up the most extended sequences in the volume. Each poem offers its truth, its eternal moment, but there is as much play between the poems as there is within them:

The moon or the pond:
Why is it dirty tonight?
It's the water that's muddy,
Not the bright moon. (43)

Over the pond
Every night the moon
Casts its light.
But the water won't be soiled;
The moon won't either. (44)

Those who meditate to purify the mind may proclaim #43, those who in meditation discover that "impure" and "pure" are an illusory dualism may quote #44, and those who choose not to divide the world into the forty-threes and the forty-fours shall smile softly while they read #45:

Night after night
The moon shines
On the pond, leaving
No light,
No trace. (45)

In the play among these poems we can catch a sense of the "capping phrase" or jakugo exercise as it is practiced in the zendo. It's a little like "the Dozens" as practiced by George Carlin, insofar as only the Fearless One has the freedom to cap one insight with another...and another. How dreadful to be the empty-pursed courtier of Hamlet, having squandered his golden phrase.

It would be a mistake to divide these poems into categories for very long, since themes intermingle. Gratitude, Presence, and Impermanence are commonplace Buddhist themes which permeate the work as a whole, and one could do worse in selecting them as key pointers to Original Insight.

Now, now,
This now is
A time for good-bye;
Disappearing like the dew
My life, your life. (67)

With a start I see that this poem speaks not only of an antique Japanese Dharma-scribbler, but also to my own impatient, wrinkling face. In another poem it is surprising gratitude rather than Time's Chariot that awakens:

A long drought:
Not even a drop of water
To quarrel over. (108)

Everyone and her neighbor should know this.

We forget gratitude when we become territorially attached to fixed abodes, but then neither must we cling to our mountain peaks. Either way, armchair Dharma bums and

those with yamabushi tendencies alike will delight in this Mind-dissolving collection.

—John Whalen-Bridge

Why I Don't Meditate

Mental health is probably overrated—a little anxiety
is a great source
for poetic composition & besides I prefer sitting
on chairs with heavy cushions & a footstool
if at all possible.

—Charles Bernstein

REALISM AS AN IMPULSE FRAUGHT WITH THE ANXIETY THAT IMPOSSIBILITY EVER CONTENDS WITH, FORSAKEN AT GREAT PERSONAL COST & THEREFORE NOT TO BE SIMPLY "RECANTED"...

Early on in his Indian Journals, in an entry titled "CHINESE OPIUM 'DEN'" & subtitled "Calcutta, July 8, 1962," Allen Ginsberg confronts doubts that have arisen in him regarding

his self-perceived as old-hat practice self-described on the back cover of the book as "lonely handwork of self keeping record of self's consciousness, old yoga of Poesy—". He contends against these doubts & momentarily overcomes them, first by stating as objectively & persuasively as possible the case for formalism (which he doesn't name as such), a stance towards reality that is opposed, he says, to the "habitual humanistic... autobiographical photograph" for which Ginsberg is—& was already then—best known; then, second, by defining his poetic practice negatively as an egotistical hesitation & cowardice before chaos; & then third (after a bit of experimental scribbling which seems to serve the purpose of revivifying for Ginsberg just what it is he does when he writes) by confirming that he is, for better or worse, committed to his realism. "Well life itself is a composition of elements outside words," is how he puts it.

This is what Ginsberg writes:

> Poetry XX Century like all arts and sciences is devolving into examination-experiment on the very material of which it's made. They say "an examination of language itself" to express this turnabout from photographic objectivity to subjective-abstract composition of words á la Burroughs.
>
> As post-Einsteinian science is supposed to come to the frontier of objective research whereat the research instruments themselves are questioned, the human measuring brain is analysed as far as it can analyse itself, to see how the structure of the brain-mind determines the interpretation of the "outside" universe—now found to be contained in the mind perhaps & having no objective shape outside of the measuring mind.

So painting changes thru Cezanne to tricks of space, thru cubism to analysis, finally thru Action to the paint itself as the subject matter.

So music moves from old habitual scales & harmonies to abstract mathematic potentialities unrestricted by human presupposition.

Now poetry instead of relying for effect on dreaminess of image or sharpness of visual phanopoeia—instead of conjuring a vision or telling a truth, stops. Because all visions & all truths are no longer considerable as objective & eternal facts, but as plastic projections of the maker & his language. So nobody can seriously go on passionately concerned with effects however seeming-real they be, when he knows inside all his visions & truths are empty, finally. So the next step is examination of the cause of these effects, the vehicle of the vision, the conceiver of the truth, which is: words. Language, the prime material of itself.

So the next step is, how do you write a poetry about poetry (not as objective abstract subject matter á la Robert Duncan or Pound)—but making use of a radical method of eliminating subject matter altogether. By means of what kind of arrangement of words:

Radical means:

Composition in Void: Gertrude Stein
Association: Kerouac & Surrealism
Break up of syntax: Gertrude Stein
Arrangement of intuitive key words: John Ashbery's Europe.
Randon juxtaposition: W.S. Burroughs
Boiling down Elements of Image to Abstract Nub: Corso

Arrangement of sounds: Artaud, Lettrism, Tantric Mantras
Record of Mind-Flow: Kerouac

I seem to be delaying a step forward in this field (elimination of subject matter) and hanging on to habitual humanistic series of autobiographical photographs (as in the last writing on Orlovsky's birthday) ((it appears directly before this passage in the journal & includes such lines as "You come in the green door, long western / hair plastered down over your shoulders / from the Shower" —B. F.))—although my own Consciousness has gone beyond the conceptual to non-conceptual episodes of experience, inexpressible by old means of humanistic storytelling.

As I am anxious or fearful of plunging into the feeling & chaos of disintegration of conceptuality thru further drug experiences, and as my mind development at the year moment seems blocked so also does my "creative" activity, blocked, revolve around old abstract & tenuous sloppy political-sex diatribes & a few cool imagistic photo descriptions (which contain some human sentiment by implication)—

I really don't know what I'm doing now.
Begin a new page.

The next page then resumes the investigation:

Hair. Bedstead. Iron. Resurgence.
Rock. Capital. Indignant. Psycho.
It is like the word association test I took in Stanford on LSD with Dr. Joe Adams. The discrete words meant

nothing except superficial associations, but as words were solid objects which I had no practical use for at the time.

A Composition of Elements

Cling! the sound of rikshaw handbells
struck against the wooden pull-poles,
(this echoes & reechoes thruout Calcutta
day and nite—always invisible reminder)
by the row of Rikshaw boys outside hotel door in street below.

. . .

Now it took all those words to place here the swift sound
I recognize in an instant.
Well life itself is a composition of elements outside words.

What I appreciate in this passage as in most of Allen Ginsberg's writing is the rigorous honesty, the intensity with which the problem is addressed, & that the problem is tagged as a life problem; also, the generosity with which he paraphrases ideas not his own & the gentleness with which he holds himself apart from what were, after all, the endeavors of his friends.

I want to note too that the formalism Ginsberg's work opposed was no less compatible with romanticism & visionary experience than was the realism he attained to. In fact, in Ginsberg's conception, the "Radical Means" of broken syntax, random juxtaposition & composition by sound were ways of maintaining access to "non-conceptual episodes of experience" already known to him but "inexpressible by old means of humanistic storytelling." I should also say that realism, given its standing as the name of an historically mapped-out movement, may not be the right word to describe formalism's counter-tendency, & formalism too is a time-honored usage better left, perhaps, to the past.

* *

In "Notes on Coolidge, Objectives, Zukofsky, Romanticism, and &," Robert Grenier writes:

> Reference vs. non-reference? It's not that simple. Ginsberg set out (viz. Indian Journals) to bring words as close as possible to facts of event perceived & ends up contributing to experience in language. Z((ukofsky)) aspires to condition of music & ends up writing nature into existence, clearly telling names & characteristics of things.

What I get from this remark, beyond the tender recuperation of Ginsberg's banality & Zukofsky's austerity—& what makes this passage such an interesting footnote to the passage from Ginsberg's Indian Journals quoted above—is that contending positions are reconcilable, in the imagination if not in the world.

Robert Grenier once told me, "I am not interested in construction for its own sake—my work is about looking at the world through the prism of language." I saw in that statement a way of thinking about realism & formalism that goes a long way towards eliminating the tedious either/or side-taking that has, at this point, made discussion of poetics unbearably stifling.

—Benjamin Friedlander

Backslid

You get wet & it doesn't even matter

& the further in the future the longer the verb.

Its stem implies forgetting, growing

like a stick of tree, leafless.

You stomp on the end if it's in the past,

sitting down to a bowl of milky broth.

Treasuries

My heart is toiled & a dimwit
numbness shakes
as if I'd drawn some water
to the drain
one slap last.
Is it lapping in thine lapping
that thou singest?

—Pat Reed / Benjamin Friedlander

BLACK ON WHITE

Leave no traces. An idea explicit in Zen and familiar to any printer. Especially those of us who still feed each sheet by hand. There's all that set up & you just can't worry if you get ink on your hands while you're pushing the type around and adjusting an old press. Then you've got to get your hands so clean that no smudges transfer to the white paper as you handle it. Unlike a surgeon, you're scrubbing your hands to rid them of exactly that substance you want to put on the paper. Moxon (see below) tells us that no matter how much printing had been done on it, until all the printing was completed on both sides of a sheet, seventeenth century British printers called the sheet "white."

(Isn't that, after all, the true morals behind any square dealing. Leave no traces. That is, there are only a few non-violent elusive ways to enter someone's life, be in it, and, if necessary, exit it.)

The deliberate placement of words and images on paper, not usually your own words, making copies for other, often unknown eyes to read. And all the time to strive for anonymity (no fingerprints on the white paper). This is not about the value of cleanliness, but of bowing out.

In 1683, Joseph Moxon spelled out how rigidly a pressman strives for uniformity:

> He keeps a constant and methodical posture and gesture in every action of Pulling and Beating which in a train of

> work becomes habitual to him, and eases his Body, by not running into unnecessary divertions of Postures and Gestures in his Labour, and it eases his mind from much of its care, for the same causes have constantly the same effects. And a Pull of the same strength upon the same Form, with the same Beating, and with the same Blankets, &c. will give the same Colour and Impression.

Anyway, maybe that's why I have a slight aversion to books you can't slip under a door.

There's something intrinsically devotional to me about portable, unobtrusive books and printing. The Jews left Egypt and carried the Law for 40 years. About the year 770 AD, the Empress Shotoku commissioned four dharani (prayers) taken from the Vimla suddha prabhasa mahadharani (a sutra) to be printed a total of one million times. These were enshrined in small wooden receptacles and spread throughout Japan. They commemorated the dead and they were, it is thought, the first text printing on paper.

All to say that the process and the object are both devotional. The habits of the process maintain and carefully break the colorless silence of the white sheet. This, of course, isn't a theory, just my feeling. The kind of stuff you think about when the left foot pumps the treadle, the right foot anchors the body, the left hand removes the printed sheet, the right hand feeds the new blank sheet, the flywheel spins with the momentum of your work and the rollers coat the type with shiny black ink.

* * *

It all seems so human: the hinge of the platen press working

much the same as my elbow. Why did these machines seem so inhuman 150 years ago? Is it that quaintness makes something less threatening? Will semiconductors seem human when we fully realize how much they're like the synapses of our nervous system and, as with the hand printing press, don't need the chips anymore for commerce? Maybe. Whatever the reason, it seems to take us a while to realize how much our artifacts are a part of, not just the world, but ourselves. As if there was a difference.

—David I Sheidlower

Andrew Schelling & Benjamin Friedlander, editors.

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The Preliminary Written Statements by Steve Benson, Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder appeared in Poetry Flash No. 169, April 1987.

Copies of Jimmy & Lucy's House of "K" #8 are still available, $6 postpaid. Essays, reviews and poetry by Kenneth Irby, Adam Moorad, Alan Davies, David I Sheidlower, Lyn Hejinian, Bruce Boone, Gordon, Norman Fischer, Clayton Eshleman, Barbara Moraff and others.

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