

# THE DOUBLY EASTERN SNYDER: ZEN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND POETICS IN SELECTED SHORT POEMS BY GARY SNYDER<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This paper examines the influence of Zen Buddhist philosophy and poetics on Gary Snyder's poetry. Snyder's short poems reflect fundamental Zen Buddhist concepts of emptiness, impermanence, non-duality, the interpenetration and interdependence of all existence, Buddha nature as well as mindfulness and the connection between mindfulness and daily manual work. A close comparative reading of Snyder's poems also reveals their formal affinity with Zen Buddhist poetics in their conciseness, haiku-*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the 20<sup>th</sup> International Conference on American Literature held in Boston, U.S.A. from May 21-24, 2009. The paper is a continuation of an earlier paper entitled "A Close Reading of Gary Snyder's Poems as Zen Buddhist Verse: Ancient Eastern Wisdom filtered through Contemporary American Consciousness" delivered at the 6<sup>th</sup> Malaysia International Conference on Languages, Literatures, and Cultures held in Putrajaya, Malaysia from April 28-30, 2009.

I wish to express my deep gratitude to Prof. Dr. Allen Wittenborn, San Diego State University, for inspiring me to do research on this topic and for his valuable time spent with me in the discussion of Buddhism. I also owe my thanks to Dr. Ingo Peters, my colleague, for his constructive comment and valuable advice on my research methodology.

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*ness of spirit and expression, enigmatic koan-like quality, understatement, and Zen qualities of silence and stillness in a universe of change. Further similarities are found in the elimination of the distinction between the human subject and the nonhuman object, the minimum use of or avoidance of the human subject pronoun "I," thus eradicating anthropocentrism and egotism, the depiction of everyday life and ordinary events, the portrayal of nature imagery in which all things are interdependent and duality is erased, the minimalization of manifold details of the scenery and reduction of perception to merely concrete objects as well as the employment of plain colloquial language. Through the configuration of Eastern ethics and aesthetics, Snyder creates a new kind of poetry with a new ethic, a new aesthetic, and thus signals a new direction in American poetry.*

To what shall  
I liken the world  
Moonlight, reflected  
In dewdrops,  
Shaken from a crane's bill  
Dōgen (1200–1253)

## Introduction

Zen Buddhism is a school of Mahayana Buddhism which asserts that one must look inside oneself for understanding rather than depend on sacred writings. It aims at enlightenment through meditation. Zen Buddhism originated with the Indian Buddhist *dhyana* ("contemplation") sects and was introduced into China where it was called Ch'an. Zen stresses a love of nature and the rustic life, themes which have served as inspiration for a large number of artistic and poetic activities. A direct master-disciple relationship, oral instruction, and strict discipline prepare the pupil for rigorous

meditation. *Satori*, an opening of the mind's eye or a spontaneous awakening to one's true nature and hence the nature of all existence, is the goal to be achieved. The ideal Zen personality is one capable of both quiet meditation and life-affirming activism.

The two Japanese Zen sects, Rinzai and Soto, emphasize strength of character and personal discipline. Both use the *zazen*<sup>3</sup> and the *koan*<sup>4</sup> to heighten intuition and propel the mediator's mind into *satori*. The Rinzai sect, however, emphasizes the koan and abrupt enlightenment while Soto stresses *zazen* and a more gradual attainment of *satori*. The Zen art styles, including poetry, stress a mode of combining nature and intuition, expressed in terms which are refined, intimate and simple.

Zen Buddhism teaches that the potential to achieve enlightenment is inherent in everybody but lies dormant because of ignorance. It is best awakened not by the study of scriptures, rites and ceremonies, or the worship of images but by breaking through the boundaries of

logical thought. This tradition of Buddhist spiritual practice, in other words, rejects ritualism in favor of simplicity, and focuses on meditation and the constant awareness of the mind leading to *satori*.

### Some fundamental Zen Buddhist concepts

Buddhism is not only a religion but it can also be seen as practical philosophy, psychology and a way of life. As philosophy, Buddhism suggests a way of thinking and a point of view towards the world. As psychology, Buddhism teaches a way of understanding and dealing with people and the world. Jean Smith remarks that the Buddha's enlightenment under the bodhi tree was the culmination of years of searching for answers to the fundamental questions of existence. These questions concern the meaning of life and death, the nature of existence and, in particular, the meaning of suffering. The Buddha, thus, may be considered the Great Philosopher, and the Four Noble Truths<sup>5</sup> the answer to the central problems of our existence (Smith 2000: 105).

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<sup>3</sup> *zazen*, literally meaning seated mind, is a sitting meditation practice in a cross-legged posture. This seated meditation is the core of Zen practice. The method is to concentrate on the breath and then try to clear the mind of all thought. This eliminates the constant chatter of the mind and results in an awakening or *satori*.

<sup>4</sup> *koan*, which is a deliberately irrational statement or an unsolvable riddle in baffling language, is a formulation pointing to ultimate truth. Well-known examples are for instance, "what is the sound of one hand clapping?" and "what was your face before you were born?" Instructions given by enlightened masters are often viewed as koans. Koans cannot be solved by recourse to logical reasoning but only by awakening a deeper level of the mind beyond the discursive intellect. A knot of doubt that results when a koan is grappled with can lead one to have a breakthrough and experience the ultimate awakening.

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<sup>5</sup> The central teachings of the Buddha focus on the Four Noble Truths:

1. *Dukkha* or suffering is the intrinsic nature of existence.

2. There is a cause for suffering: craving, grasping, attachment, and the desire for things to be different from what they are.

3. The cessation of suffering: there is an end to the desire for things to be different, to craving, to grasping, and to attachment.

4. The way to end suffering is through the Eightfold Path: right action, right speech, right livelihood, right thought, right view, right mindfulness, right concentration or meditation, and right effort.

The Four Noble Truth shows how in *samsara*—the cycle of birth and death—the Eightfold Path can lead to *nirvana* ("blown out"), the relinquishing of grasping and suffering.

As a way of life, Zen Buddhism strongly encourages followers to bring the teachings and beliefs to everyday living. In Zen Buddhism, mindfulness is the key and is fundamental to all practice. To be mindful is to be present to the moment, to the life one is living, and to be attentive to what one is thinking, saying and doing. The follower of Zen Buddhism learns to be mindful while performing a daily routine or working. Vietnamese Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, vividly illustrates his instruction of mindfulness in *Zen Keys* by referring to an event in the life of Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, when the Buddha was engaged in a dialog with a renowned philosopher:

“I have heard that Buddhism is a doctrine of enlightenment. What is your method? What do you practice every day?”

“We walk, we eat, we wash ourselves, we sit down.”

“What is so special about that? Everyone walks, eats, washes, sits down ...”

“Sir, when we walk, we are aware that we are walking; when we eat, we are aware that we are eating ... When others walk, eat, wash, or sit down, they are generally not aware of what they are doing.” (Nhat Hanh 1995: 25)

Mindfulness enables one to be constantly aware of one’s own thoughts, feelings and actions. Mindfulness helps those who practice to focus their attention on what they are doing, saying and thinking and develop full concentration so that they do not waste their time and their lives in forgetfulness.

The practice of mindfulness is closely related to everyday life and its daily duties and manual work. Zen Buddhism emphasizes the importance and value of manual labor

and regards manual labor as part of Zen training. In the monastery, Zen Buddhist monks learn to be mindful while they are doing such routine work as fetching water, looking for firewood, cleaning, gardening, heating the bath tub, planting vegetables and preparing food. Pai-chang, the eighth-century abbot of a large monastery preached the significance of manual work. He left behind a famous saying which had been the guiding principle throughout his own life: “a day without work is a day without food” (qtd. in Sato 1984: 132). Zen training can be done through carrying out daily work as well as through practicing zazen. Daisetz T. Suzuki further remarks, “Satori finds a meaning hitherto hidden in our daily concrete particular experiences, such as eating, drinking, or business of all kinds,” (*Zen and Japanese Culture* 1973: 16). In doing manual work one not only contributes to the maintenance of the home and the community but also works one’s way towards the realization of one’s own true self.

Emptiness or sunyata is a central concept in Zen Buddhism. This concept describes the essential nature of all things; all phenomena are empty of a separate, independent self. Thich Nhat Hanh elucidates that to be empty is not to be non-existent but to be without a permanent identity (Nhat Hanh 1995: 106). This characteristic Buddhist trait of no-self is closely related to the concept of impermanence. Since everything is impermanent and in a state of perpetual change, it cannot maintain a fixed identity.

It is paradoxical that because of their nature of emptiness and impermanence, all phenomena can exist. This concept of emptiness, though seemingly negative, proves to be of positive significance and is an affirmation of all lives and existence. As Thich Nhat Hanh further explains:

... Existence would be impossible if things were not empty of an absolute self. If they were not impermanent, how could a grain of corn grow into an ear of corn? How could your little girl grow up into a beautiful young lady? (Nhat Hanh 1995: 106)

The perception of a permanent self is, thus, held to be an illusion. Any perception, any mental process, any consciousness is to be seen with the right discernment that “this is not myself” and “this is not mine.” Perceiving the truth that all existence is devoid of a fixed identity helps one to lessen or eliminate egoism.

The doctrine of “no-self” or the lack of inherent identity of all things leads to another fundamental Buddhist concept of the interrelatedness and interdependence of all existence that Thich Nhat Hanh calls “the inter being nature of things” (Nhat Hanh 1995: 41). This concept is a non-discriminatory view in which all sentient beings and inanimate things in the universe are inseparably connected and interdependent in a great web of interrelatedness. Seen in this light, whatever happens to one thing will certainly affect others; what one says and what one does will have an effect upon the whole universe. As Ernest Wood elaborates:

Not a grain of dust can get away and exist separately or alone ... the old Chinese Zen Masters ... saw everything in nature as interrelated with everything else, and did not regard some as good and others as bad, or some as superior or higher and others as inferior or lower. (Wood 1984: 79)

With this non-discriminatory attitude, humans are not superior to other beings and things on earth; nor are humans the sole owners of

the earth. This notion of interdependence is conducive to a life of compassion in which humans should show kindness and care to other fellow humans as well as all things that constitute and share the intricate web of constantly changing interrelationship.

The concepts of “no-self” and interrelatedness lead to the principle of non-duality. With the view of the universe as a living entity in which all things, emanating from “One Mind,” are inseparable and interdependent, contradiction does not exist. In the universe all elements are complementary to one another and there are no binary oppositions. Zen Buddhism does not discriminate between mind and matter, subject and object. According to Mahaprajñāparamita Sūtra “Mind is matter, matter is mind. Mind does not exist outside of matter. Each is in the other. This is called the ‘nonduality’ of mind and matter” (qtd. in Nhat Hanh 1995: 89). Japanese Zen master Dōgen affirms, “All phenomena are mind; mind is all. Mind contains rivers, mountains, moon, and sun” (qtd. in Nhat Hanh 1995: 89). Jean Smith vividly delineates this concept through the parable of Indra’s net<sup>6</sup> found in Hindu mythology:

The word “non-duality” refers to having no separate self, to not seeing other people and things as different from yourself ... to see yourself as part of everything in the universe. This relationship is well expressed in the story ... of Indra creating a vast network of jewels, each of which reflects every other

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<sup>6</sup> Indra’s net is a metaphor frequently used to illustrate the concepts of emptiness, dependent origination and interpenetration in Buddhist philosophy. This metaphor was found in the Avatamsaka Sūtra and later developed by the Hua-yen, a major school of Chinese Buddhism.

jewel and is reflected in every other jewel. You are one connection on Indra's net—and anything that happens in that net is going to affect everything else in that net. (Smith 2000: 124)

The Buddhist confirmation of the interpenetration of all things is in direct contradiction to those linguistic constructs which are based on binary oppositions: physical/spiritual, illusion/reality, permanence/impermanence, activity/passivity, abstract/concrete, heart/intellect, reason/imagination and form/emptiness. In this non-dualistic universe, there is no separation between those falsely assumed opposite pairs. Dōgen explicates the interpenetration of reality and illusion: “all is illusion, and being empty in its very essence is in that sense identical with absolute reality” (Cleary 1986: 64).

In Zen Buddhism all things are considered as having the Buddha nature or Buddhahood. Buddha nature is the original pure nature inherent in all beings which when realized leads to the liberation of the body and mind and to enlightenment. As the Buddha nature is intrinsic to all things, all phenomena—sentient beings as well as insentient beings—have equal potential for enlightenment.

Buddha nature is like a precious essence, a seed or a jewel inside all beings but its presence and radiance are obscured by desires, attachments, delusions, anger, ignorance and other defilements. Each being has the same potential but the awakened are those who can eliminate their desires and all defilements which cover their Buddha nature and, ultimately, see into their own true nature. Daisetz T. Suzuki describes the experience of seeing directly into one's original nature:

Zen calls this “returning to one's own home”; for its followers will

declare: “you have now found yourself: from every beginning nothing has been kept away from you. It was yourself that closed the eye to the fact. In Zen there is nothing to explain, nothing to teach, that will add to your knowledge. (Suzuki 1973: 245)

Thich Nhat Hanh emphasizes deep insight into one's own mind as the goal of Zen:

Seeing into one's own nature is the goal of Zen ... It is a profound insight derived from living in the heart of reality, in perfect mindfulness ... a direct pointing to the heart of reality so that we might see into our own nature and wake up. (Nhat Hanh 1995: 34)

To “wake up” is to achieve buddhahood, to have a true perception, to recognize the emptiness and impermanence of all existence and to have an awareness of the cosmic interpenetration of all phenomena.

### **Zen Buddhist poetics**

Since its inception, Zen Buddhism has had a paradoxical relationship with literature. Although Zen focuses on “direct pointing” to the mind and seeing into one's nature and discourages adherence to words and texts, a rich corpus of written literature—be it scriptures, sūtras, discourses, commentaries, volumes of kōan riddles and poetry—has been produced and has proved useful in Zen teaching and practice. Poetry, through being capable of capturing the essence of a moment's experience, has found its luminous way into the Zen tradition. The use of poetry to contain the inexpressible within its configuration of words, rhythms, and silences goes back to the very roots of Indian and Chinese traditions and has continued into the

Japanese school. Hamill and Seaton remark that poetry—though no substitute for *zazen*—can help deepen one’s practice and lead one further on the path toward a greater awareness and understanding of the universe (Hamill 2004: 7).

Monks and lay poets have contributed to the Zen poetic tradition. Their poetry, inspired by their beliefs and practices, embodies the spirit of Zen and illuminates in words Zen experience. Zen monks have made use of poetry both as artistic practice and as a means of teaching “by direct pointing.” The attraction of lay poets to Zen themes and the social and poetic interaction of lay poets with monks and monk-poets affirm that the flourishing of Zen ethics and Zen poetics has evidently been a mutually nourishing phenomenon.

Zen and its expression in poetry had its origin in Ch’an and was later introduced to the Japanese. According to Pollack, earlier Ch’an monks made use of a strictly religious verse form that might be translated as “hymn.” The “hymn,” deliberately kept as unliterary as possible, consisted of long, jargon-filled expositions of doctrine and faith (Pollack 1985: 4–5). However, in later periods, Ch’an poets employed enigmatic and paradoxical style more appealing with its implications of Zen worldview. Japanese monks and poets, while adapting Zen poetry from China, faithfully imitated their mainland models and reflected the original Chinese style. However, they also simultaneously modified and developed their poetry into entirely Japanese practices that reveal an informing Japanese spirit at work in religion and aesthetics. Daisetz T. Suzuki remarks that Zen played an important part in molding Japanese culture and character, and, no less significant, in the composition of a form of poetry known as

the haiku<sup>7</sup> (*Zen and Japanese Culture* 1973: 18), probably the shortest poetic form in the world’s literary history. With its brevity, spontaneity, juxtaposition of striking images and sudden illumination, the haiku has been regarded by many practitioners as the supreme achievement of Zen culture.

Zen poetry in Chinese and Japanese may roughly be divided into two distinctive types: overtly religious poems and enigmatic imagistic poems,<sup>8</sup> especially the haiku. The former, doctrinal in orientation, deal with religious subject matter and make use of Zen terms or refer clearly to well-known koans or Zen doctrines in their wording or titles. These poems preceded the latter which are devoid of abstract words and overtly religious language but present a clear picture conceived to arouse a distinct emotion and suggest a specific spiritual insight. These imagistic poems, applying the concept of Zen pointing, penetrate beyond the perceptions of the rational mind and its supporting senses to reveal not nature’s surface but its very essence. The artistic technique must flow

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<sup>7</sup> The Haiku is a form of Japanese verse that encapsulates a single impression of a natural object or scene, within a particular season, in seventeen syllables, which are arranged in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. Arising in the 16th century, the haiku flourished in the hands of Bashō (1644-94) and Buson (1715-83). The haiku convention, whereby messages and meanings are suggested by natural objects rather than directly stated, has appealed, since the early 20th century, to many Western imitators, notably the Imagists (Baldick 1990: 95).

<sup>8</sup> My study and classification of Zen poems coincides with Chang-Heoun Ryu in his “Gary Snyder’s Poetic World: A Study of Zen Poetry.” In his dissertation he classifies Zen poetry into two groups, Zen-idea poetry which advocates directly Zenic ideas and Zen-taste poetry which expresses indirectly Zenic ideas (qtd. in Won-Chung Kim 2008: 2).

thoughtlessly from deep within capturing the fleeting images of the inner sense, beyond mind and beyond thought. To put it in terms of Zen Buddhism, the poem flows out of the Zen discipline of “no-mind.”

Despite these major differences, the two types of Zen poems share certain common characteristics. As the rule of silence prevails during meditation, monastic working and daily routine, silence permeates Zen poems. Silence does not only mean quietness but also implies emptiness and harmonious coexistence. With the Zen outlook that there is no human domination in this great web of interdependence, the poet does not stand apart from or in opposition to his work and environment. In this light, there is no distinction between the human subject and the animate or inanimate object, the perceiver and the perceived. Thus, the human speaker or persona “I” is generally omitted.

Apart from these common characteristics, the second type of Zen poems—the enigmatic imagistic type—is notable for its nature imagery. In these poems, concrete nature images abound and animal images are used with much frequency, with the aim of conveying a profound Buddhist message. The poems mostly deal with daily life and present small unadorned everyday objects and activities, all of which assume a significance beyond themselves. Manifold details are reduced to minimal items, thereby reflecting a mind stripped of attachment and empty of illusions. Great poems are also remarkable for their conciseness, spontaneity, understatement, enigmatic koan-like quality and their application of simple ordinary language.

The first category of Zen poems are didactic religious poems which directly deal with Zen doctrines. “Beauty and ugliness have one origin” by Lao Tzu is an obvious

example of an overtly religious poem, doctrinal in orientation and didactic in approach. The poem illustrates the Zen concept of non-duality. As all things emanate from “One Mind,” they are inseparable and interdependent. There are no such binary oppositions as “beauty and ugliness”, “virtue and evil”, as well as “is and is not”:

Beauty and ugliness have one origin.  
Name beauty, and ugliness is.  
Recognizing virtue recognizes evil.

**Is and is not** produce one another.  
The difficult is born in the easy,  
long is defined by short, the high by the low.  
Instrument and voice achieve one harmony.  
**Before and after** have places.

In this principle of non-duality, no object or attribute can be inherently better or worse than any other. All objects and attributes manifest Zen teachings in equal measure and are equally emblematic of them.

Han Shan, the Chinese hermit who scribbled poems on cave walls, rocks, and trees around temples, shrines, and monasteries in the mountain region, is a world-renowned Zen poet whose style is direct and unpolished. “Jade green pool spring water’s clear” delineates the Zen concept of emptiness. Everything is impermanent and possesses no separate, independent self. Han Shan invites us to ponder over emptiness as the true nature of all phenomena:

Jade green pool spring water’s clear  
The spirit of itself brings dark mysteries to light.  
Meditate on emptiness: it’s all the more quiet.

Japanese Zen master Ikkyū Sōjun wrote didactic poems which deal directly with Zen scholarship and practice. “A Natural Way” emphasizes the Zen Way of direct pointing and seeing into one’s own nature. Knowing

the “one song” in one’s own heart is worth more than the rigorous study of ten thousand sacred texts:

The Way of the wise is without knowledge.  
How long will the pure scholars linger on?  
No Sakyas, No Maitreyas, in Nature.  
In place of ten thousand sutras, one song.

Ikkyū’s “Like vanishing dew” expresses, through nature images, the impermanence of human life. Like all natural phenomena which must undergo change, human life is impermanent and evanescent. We must be constantly aware of this fundamental law of existence:

Like vanishing dew,  
a passing apparition  
or the sudden flash  
of lightning—already gone—  
thus should one regard one’s self.

This last poem by Ikkyū, though not as straightforward as the other poems discussed earlier, still belongs to the first category for the reason that the poem is not enigmatic and does not possess a koan-like quality.

The second category of Zen poems are devoid of abstract words and overtly religious subject matter. Poems of this type are mostly intrinsically imagistic in style and enigmatic in mode. Very often in the poem, the observer merges with what is observed, resulting in no distinction between the human subject and the inhuman object, the perceiver and the perceived. The concrete images of nature and everyday life assume a significance beyond themselves and, in stimulating an emotional and intellectual response, reveal profound truth. Wang Wei made use of this enigmatic and appealingly paradoxical style in “Deer Fence.” The poem presents a worldview colored by a Ch’an understanding of the nature of reality:

Empty mountain, no one visible,  
Only echoes of voices can be heard:  
The setting sun’s rays, entering the deep woods,  
Reflect back again upon the green moss.

The poem does not contain religious jargon or expound religious doctrines but presents instead a sequence of natural images that hint allusively at the fundamental Buddhist concerns of impermanence, change and ultimate emptiness. Amidst the background of silence, the poet strips away the manifold details that comprise the illusory world generally considered “reality” to reveal the more profound truth, emptiness and the interrelatedness of all things that underlies the illusory world. The rays of the setting sun can be interpreted as a metaphor for the light of understanding that reveals truth beneath illusion. This light of perception opens and illuminates, from an angle different from that by which ordinary appearances delude, a mind “empty” of delusion.

As Zen Buddhism played a major role in the composition of the haiku, a unique Japanese form of poetry, Zen and the haiku are inextricably linked. The celebrated haiku master Bashō has been credited with infusing Zen into Japanese poetics. The haiku with its brevity of seventeen syllables in three-line form, the juxtaposition of concrete natural images and the capturing of a spontaneous moment triggers the sudden sense of Zen enlightenment. As Herrigel points out, “haiku stresses relation to space not only outwardly, in the linear arrangement, but inwardly too, in its intrinsic form” (Herrigel 1960: 75) and this intrinsic form both parallels and reflects the poet’s inner sense of sudden awareness. R.H. Blyth, an authority on the study of the haiku, explicates the interconnection between the haiku and satori, “a haiku is the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we

see into the life of things ... a significant intuition into Reality” (qtd. in Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* 1973: 228).

Bashō in his famous haiku “An old pond,” in which simple nature images are juxtaposed, captures the moment of temporary enlightenment:

An old pond,  
A frog jumps in—  
The sound of water!

The poet disengages all his interpretative faculties. His mind becomes one with the world around him, allowing his craft to operate instinctively in recording the images he perceives. For a moment he is privy to the inexpressible truth of Zen. This instantaneous perception moves directly from his senses to his innermost understanding, without having to travel through his intellect or emotion. As Hoover keenly remarks in “Zen and Haiku,” by catching the momentary at the very instant of its collision with the eternal, Bashō could produce a high-speed snapshot of the trigger mechanism of Zen enlightenment (Hoover 1977: 206).

This is evidently a nature poem at its finest, free from emotional coloring and intellectual complexity. The poem, describing an actual occurrence, a quiet evening broken by the splash of a frog into an old pond, reveals the fact that nature is there to be enjoyed and to teach the lessons of Zen. Bashō’s haiku discovers this instant of heightened awareness and passes it on to the reader unaltered and without comment. Underneath these vivid concrete images of physical phenomenon lies a Zen code pointing toward the nonphysical. According to R.H. Blyth’s:

Each thing is preaching the law  
(Dharma) incessantly, but this law is  
not something different from the thing

itself. Haiku is the revealing of this preaching by presenting us with the thing devoid of all our mental twisting and emotional discoloration; or rather, it shows the thing as it exists at one and the same time outside and inside the mind, perfectly subjective, ourselves undivided from the object, the object in its original unity with ourselves ... It is a way of returning to nature, to our moon nature, our cherry-blossom nature, our falling leaf nature, in short, to our Buddha nature. (qtd. in Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* 1973: 228)

Another haiku portraying a nameless insignificant flower in bloom was written by Shiki. The poem paints a picture of a white obscure flower against the green grass:

Among the grasses,  
An unknown flower  
Blooming white.

The flower “preaches” the law of the grand totality of the cosmic scheme and the interdependence of all things. Even though it is unimportant and humble, the flower exists in its own right as the flower is part of the totality of being and it stands connected with all other things in the universe.

One of the chief disciples of Bashō, Joso observes the law of Dharma in the fallen leaves which find their final resting place on the rocks at the bottom of the serene and silent stream:

Under the water,  
On the rock resting,  
The fallen leaves.

The fallen autumn leaves which finally settle under the water and are resting quietly on the rocks reveal the law of impermanence and the suchness of things (tathata).

The last haiku to be discussed is “Flea, lice” composed by Bashō. The poem depicts the unpleasant, even repulsive experience of having to slumber amidst fleas, lice and the horse’s urine.

Fleas, lice  
The horse pissing  
Near my pillow.

The poem displays a Zen sensitivity to small things in nature and the careful observation of minute details. Whether they are fleas or butterflies, the urine of the horses or the flight of the eagles, noble or ignoble objects, they constitute the grand totality of the cosmic scheme and are linked within the great web of interrelationship.

### **Influence of Zen Buddhism on Snyder’s poetry**

Snyder’s interest in the Orient developed concurrently with his love of nature and his respect for the Native American tradition.<sup>9</sup> All these three strains which enrich one another, constitute the main part of his poetic vision. At a very young age, a visit to the Seattle Art Museum introduced Snyder

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<sup>9</sup> According to Native American origin myth, all beings and things simultaneously moved from chaos and disorder to balance and harmony. Humans were neither radically different from nor possessed superior nature to other beings and things on earth. Given such a belief, Native Americans found that the proper relation between humans and the earth should be one of familial and personal respect. This relation is honorable because of kinship derived from a common beginning. Similar to the Zen Buddhist concept, Native American wisdom acknowledges the interdependence and interconnection of all things. The Native American values a harmonious coexistence between humans and other beings and treats nature with deep respect.

to Chinese landscape painting and ignited his fascination with the Orient as an example of a high civilization that had maintained its bond with nature. Later, at Reed College, Buddhism was introduced to him through his reading of Chinese and Indian Buddhist philosophies. At the University of California, Berkeley, Snyder studied Oriental languages and immersed himself in Zen Buddhism. He also translated some of the *Cold Mountain Poems* by the Chinese Zen hermit Han Shan. Having been awarded a scholarship by the first Zen Institute of America, Snyder went to Japan where he resided for twelve years. In Japan he took formal instruction in Buddhism under Zen masters and devoted himself to the strenuous Zen study and meditation.

Unquestionably, Snyder’s deep understanding and practice of Zen Buddhism are at the core of his poetry. Many of his poems record Buddhist ethics and his own Buddhist-oriented worldview. Such Buddhist beliefs and practices as mindfulness and its relationship to daily life and manual work, Buddha nature, non-duality, emptiness, dependant causation, interdependence of all existence, awareness of impermanence and the death-and-rebirth cycle as well as the ultimate goal of liberation from all suffering by means of insight into the true nature of existence are dealt with and vividly depicted through concrete objects and actions. His poetry blends physical reality—precise observations of nature—with insights gained through Zen Buddhism.

Snyder’s affection and reverence for nature, his passion for manual work in the wilderness and his serious engagement with Zen Buddhism inform his life. While studying for degrees at universities, Snyder also worked at different times as a lumberjack, trail maker and firewatcher. His lifestyle is a balance between physical labor,

intellectual pursuit and spiritual fulfillment. Like his life, his poetry combines action and contemplation, and physical activity and meditation. The two are fused into one, thereby reaching a state of non-duality, in which the dichotomy of physicality and spirituality, body and mind, man and nature, subject and object no longer holds sway.

In line with his Zen Buddhist beliefs and worldview, Snyder's poetry bears much resemblance to the enigmatic imagistic genre of Zen poetics. First and foremost Snyder's poems render Zen-like silence and stillness in a universe of change. His poetry has an air of spontaneity and gives the impression of simplicity in a seemingly unpolished form. Seeking to restore contact with the dynamic and flowing universe, Snyder harvests his imagery from the natural world in which all things are interconnected, duality is erased, and opposites are harmonized. The poems develop naturally and depend not on tensions between various elements but on the mutual support they give one another. Snyder draws his subject matter from everyday life and ordinary events and reduces manifold details of his surroundings to a minimal number. Like Zen poets, Snyder, seeing humans as a transient and constantly changing part of the whole, avoids or makes minimal use of the human subject, thus eliminating egoism, and frequently omits the subject pronoun "I." Further similarities can be discerned in his use of plain, colloquial language, understatement and short poetic lines as well as his reduction of perception to merely concrete objects. Furthermore, many of Snyder's poems, though not exactly resembling the haiku in form, are haiku in spirit and expression. Snyder's employment of figurative language also has an effect similar to Zen koans in baffling the reader and unfolding a new perception of truth.

The first poem to be discussed is "Why Log Truck Drivers Rise Earlier than Students of Zen." The poem delineates the practice of mindfulness and its relationship to daily manual labor. In the Zen monastery the participation of monks in such manual labor as fetching firewood, planting, preparing food and cleaning is considered a necessity and conducive to the Zen training of mindfulness. This poem demonstrates that Snyder values the physical work of the truck drivers and admires their performance in full awareness of their daily duties.

In the high seat, before-dawn dark,  
Polished hubs gleam  
And the shiny diesel stack  
Warms and flutters  
Up the Tyler Road grade  
To the logging on Poorman creek.  
Thirty miles of dust.

There is no other life.

The truck drivers' early rising before dawn, their polishing of the hubs and the trucks, and their driving along the long dusty road to the site of the logging makes evident their meticulous care and dedication to their job. They have no other life; these responsibilities constitute their whole life giving full meaning to their existence. Their attention to the work is no different from the practice of mindfulness of Zen students.

Spiritual implications can be discerned in the positioning of the words "polished," "gleam," and "flutters." In polishing the hubs, the truck drivers polish and purify their minds. The "hubs gleam" suggests a glimmer of inner light. The "shiny diesel stack" "flutters" evokes the image of a bird moving its wings, suggesting freedom or a mind free from defilements while concentrating on the work. The job of the truck drivers is,

therefore, physical work as well as spiritual exercise.

In line with Zen poetics, the poem depicts an ordinary event in plain colloquial language. Anthropocentrism is eradicated with the omission of the human subject “the truck drivers.” Understatement is encrypted in these short seemingly prosaic lines. The positioning of the words and the figures of speech gives an effect comparable with a Zen koan. The poem develops and unfolds naturally with the mutual support of all these elements affirming interconnection of all things.

Snyder recounted his impression of the truck drivers in an interview by Moyers:

... In the summer up where I live in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada a little group of people practice zazen ... in the early morning. We go up and sit on the pine needles on a little ridge in the five a.m. light. But even then, starting at three thirty a.m. or so, the log trucks were already on their way into the high country. The paved road is four miles away, but you can hear them because those big diesels really wrap it up when they head up the hill. So the working people are up as early as the spiritual people and the question is, “Who is more spiritual?” (Moyers 1995: 369)

In another interview in New York City in the month of April 1977 by Peter Barry Chowka, Snyder elaborated on his notion of work. To him, spiritual work is neither contrasting nor superior to physical work; both types are, in the Zen outlook, intricately interwoven:

... It’s an effort in the right direction –that which is “spiritual” and that which is sweeping the floor are not

so separated. This is one of the legacies of Zen, Soto or Rinzai—to steadily pursue the unity of daily life and spiritual practice. (Snyder, *The Real Work* 1980: 104)

Daisetz T. Suzuki in *Zen and Japanese Culture* further extends this notion and makes an implicit connection between satori and concrete experiences in daily life and work:

Satori finds a meaning hitherto hidden in our daily concrete particular experiences such as eating, drinking or business of all kinds ... The meaning thus revealed is not something added from the outside. It is in being itself, in becoming itself, in living itself. (Suzuki 1973:16)

The celebration of the work of hands is connected with the placing of rocks in “Riprap.”<sup>10</sup> In this poem, Snyder compares the composition of a poem to the construction of a trail for horses in the mountains. As building the path requires the careful selection of exact stones, crafty precision in laying them together and skill in harmonizing them with the natural surroundings, so does composing a poem which entails the particular choice of words for their sense, sound, and rhythm as well as putting these words together in a subtle pattern that will stand the test of time. The aim of these two types of creation is not only to achieve harmony with nature but also to create an inner harmony corresponding to the natural external harmony. Both activities, accompanied by silence, with the former being a physical act and the latter being a mental, almost spiritual, deed, are Zen practice of mindfulness.

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<sup>10</sup> “Riprap” is a miniature narrative captured from the active working life of the poet himself.

Lay down these words  
Before your mind like rocks.  
    placed solid, by hands  
In choice of place, set  
Before the body of the mind  
    in space and time  
Solidity of bark, leaf, or wall  
    riprap of things:  
Cobble of milky way,  
    straying planets,  
These poems, people,  
    lost ponies with  
Dragging saddles  
    and rocky sure-foot trails.  
(1–14)

By depicting the interpenetration of these binary oppositions: body and mind “before the body of the mind”: solidity “solidity of bark, leaf or wall” and changeability “all change”: physical and spiritual: the poem illustrates the Zen concept of non-duality in which there is no contradiction as all elements are complementary to one another. Nothing possesses a separate identity; everything is empty of any inherent nature and is subject to the law of change. The principle of interconnection and interdependence applies to all things in the intricate web of constant change.

    ants and pebbles  
In the thin loam, each rock a word  
    a creek-washed stone  
Granite: ingrained  
    with torment of fire and weight  
Crystal and sediment linked hot  
    all change, in thoughts,  
As well as things. (18–25)

In the poem Snyder incorporates Zen koans in his figurative language and in the interplay between illusion and reality, which by their very nature is none other than emptiness. The poet replaces the discriminatory dualistic worldview of the West with the

tenet of holistic, organic balance and harmony unfolded by his Zen study and practice.

In “Riprap” Snyder carefully selects each word for its sense, its sound and for the rhythm each word creates in the poem. All the words in the poem are one-syllable and two-syllable words with only two exceptions which are three-syllable words. These short words require strong beats and create slow gentle rhythms. The strong beats reflect the determination in the practice of mindfulness and the slow gentle rhythms reflect the tranquility of the surroundings which harmonizes with the silence and stillness of the mind as in Zen meditation. The careful selection of the diction for its sense, sounds and the subtle rhythmic patterns makes the poem an aesthetic work as well as a spiritual exercise.

In Zen Buddhism all things are considered as having the Buddha nature. The seed of Buddha nature exists in human beings as well as non-human beings, in the animate world as well as the inanimate world. Viewed in this light, human superiority to other beings and humans’ privileging of themselves over other beings are a false belief and a misinterpretation on the part of humans themselves. “Magpie’s Song” captures moments at which a magpie, being aware of its Buddha nature and having attained the Buddhahood, enlightens the human observer to look directly into his mind and discover his original intrinsic nature “Turquoise blue” hidden deep inside himself. The bird also invites the observer to feel the spirit of nature “Smell the breeze / It came through all the trees,” become one with nature, and be at peace with himself “be at rest.” Snyder in picturing in words “The wind sound” suggests that the natural world is permeated

with the sounds of Dharma<sup>11</sup> as R.H. Blyth notes “Each thing is preaching the law (Dharma) incessantly” (qtd. in Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* 1973: 228). Furthermore, the kinship between humans and animals is implicit in the magpie’s addressing the human observer as “*brother*,” reaffirming the Zen principle of interrelatedness of all beings.

Six A.M.,  
Sat down on excavation gravel  
by juniper and desert S.P. tracks  
interstate 80 not far off  
    between trucks  
Coyotes— maybe three  
    howling and yapping from a rise.

Magpie on a bough  
Tipped his head and said,

    “Here in the mind, brother  
    Turquoise blue.  
    I wouldn’t fool you.  
    Smell the breeze  
    It came through all the trees  
    No need to fear  
    What’s ahead  
    Snow up on the hills west  
    Will be there every year  
    be at rest.  
    A feather on the ground—  
    The wind sound—

Here in the Mind, Brother,  
Turquoise Blue”

The poem draws together Snyder’s intimacy with the natural world, his Zen Buddhist beliefs, and his reverence for Native American traditions. In comparing the Buddha nature to

turquoise, the poet is influenced by Native American culture because turquoise is deemed a precious mineral and is often used in Native American jewelry. Like classic Zen poems, Snyder employs animal imagery, depicting three coyotes “howling and yapping from a rise” and focusing on the magpie as the center of attention and, more fascinatingly, as the speaker who unfolds the ultimate truth to the unenlightened human. In line with Zen poetics, Snyder makes minimal use of the human subject and altogether leaves out the subject pronoun “I” “Sat down on excavation gravel,” thus making the observer merge with the observed. Again, the figurative language and the speech of the magpie function as koans to jerk the reader’s mind into a fresh reflection and a new perception of truth.

“Avocado” can be read as a zen koan in poetic form. The whole poem presents a connected series of riddles to trigger the reader’s mind into instant enlightenment. Snyder likens Dharma to an avocado with “The great big round seed / In the middle.” This “Pure and smooth” seed embedded in the center is the Buddha nature inherent in all beings. However, this original pure nature has been enveloped and long buried underneath greed, anger, attachment, lust, ignorance and other defilements, making it difficult or almost impossible for humans to gain this awareness and realize their potentiality for awakening “Almost nobody ever splits it open / Or ever tries to see / If it will grow.”

And the skin is thin,  
The great big round seed  
In the middle,  
Is your own Original Nature—  
Pure and smooth,  
Almost nobody ever splits it open  
Or ever tries to see  
If it will grow.

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<sup>11</sup> Dharma is the teaching of the Buddha or the universal law of cause and effect that governs the universe.

The avocado consists of both the ripe soft part and the hard green part, making the avocado appealing to different people of different tastes and so does the Dharma. The Dharma can be applied to all people and can guide them towards the true perception of the emptiness and interrelatedness of all things. In this poem Snyder fascinatingly uses the concrete palpable image of an avocado which evokes the sense of smell, touch, and taste to convey an abstract meaning of spiritual truth.

The Dharma is like an Avocado!  
Some parts so ripe you can't believe it,  
But it's good.  
And other places hard and green  
Without much flavor,  
Pleasing those who like their eggs well cooked.

The poem ends puzzlingly with a paradox in the same manner as the Zen koan. The avocado seed, which seems promising for planting, is "hard and slippery" but when you attempt to plant it, it slips through the finger and falls.

Hard and slippery,  
It looks like  
You should plant it—but then  
It shoots out thru the  
                  fingers —  
gets away.

Snyder further gives his interpretation of the paradoxical trait of the Buddha nature in *Earth House Hold*:

... Buddha is an unseekable One: if you seek it you go astray. The principle is an unseekable Principle; if you seek it you lose it. And if you manage not to seek, it turns to seeking. This Dharma has neither substance or emptiness. If you are able to flow through life with a

mind as open and complete as wood or stone—then you will not be swept away and drowned by the skandhas, the five desires and the eight lusts. Then the source of Birth-and-Death will be cut off, and you will go and come freely. (Snyder 1969: 75)

In "For All" Snyder swears allegiance to all beings on earth "I pledge allegiance to the soil / of Turtle Island, / and to the beings who thereon dwell," and strengthens an affectionate bond with them. The poem records his delight in the colorful vibrant natural world "Ah to be alive / on a mid-September morn," his intimate touch with nature "fording a stream / barefoot," and his spiritual harmonious relationship with the sounds of nature "creek music, heart music." Though the speaker's "toes" are "cold" and the "nose" is "dripping," he is filled with exaltation in the midst of pristine nature. His heart is "singing inside." The "creek music", the outer song of the "Rustle" of the "icy creek waters" corresponds with the inner song of his "heart music."

Ah to be alive  
on a mid-September morn  
fording a stream  
barefoot, pants rolled up,  
holding boots, pack on,  
sunshine, ice in the shallows,  
northern rockies.

Rustle and shimmer of icy creek waters  
stones turn underfoot, small and hard as toes  
cold nose dripping  
singing inside  
creek music, heart music,  
smell of sun on gravel.

I pledge allegiance

Read together with the title "For All" the poem is a purposeful dedication to all beings

in the intricate web of the cosmos. Though all things are unique and “in diversity” in their physical appearance and particle formation, they all share “under the sun” the “one ecosystem” in “joyful penetration.” All dissimilar beings in shape and formation—be they inanimate, animate or human—are merged into one sole ecosystem in which they are gleefully dependent upon one another. The poem celebrates the healthy interaction between humans and the natural world and values the interrelatedness and interdependence of all existence.

I pledge allegiance to the soil  
of Turtle Island,  
and to the beings who thereon dwell  
one ecosystem  
in diversity  
under the sun  
With joyful interpenetration for all.

An extension of this observance is noted by the poet in *Earth House Hold*: “Buddhism holds that the universe and all creatures in it are intrinsically in a state of complete wisdom, love and compassion; acting in natural response and mutual interdependence.” (Snyder 1969: 90)

The solemn and joyful pledge of Snyder to the primitive land and his loving tie to nature in “For All” is dramatized in “We Make Our Vows Together With All Beings.” The poem vividly portrays the poet and a doe performing the same deed concurrently, the poet “eating a sandwich” and the doe nibbling “buckbrush” and their similar spontaneous reaction to a bomber which disrupts the serenity of the snowy woods and “fills the sky with a roar.” By such a portrayal Snyder obliterates the differentiating line between the human world and the animate realm, blending the two into “one ecosystem” undivided with common sharing and sensitivity.

Eating a sandwich  
At work in the woods,

As a doe nibbles buckbrush in snow  
Watching each other,  
chewing together.

A Bomber from Beale  
over the clouds,  
Fills the sky with a roar.

She lifts head, listens,  
Waits till the sound has gone by.

So do I.

The speaker’s and the doe’s identical reaction is no sheer coincidence but a display of their natural bond and harmonious coexistence. Darin Pradittatsanee remarks that this poem reflects Snyder’s responsibility “that is fully grounded in his discernment of nature’s web of interrelationships and an awareness that his existence is shaped by, and part of, nature as a whole.” (Pradittatsanee 2007: 152)

The last poem to be discussed is “Piute Creek.” This poem subtly interweaves the wonder of nature, the interconnection of all beings and the uncovering of the Buddha nature, all culminating in a moment of enlightenment. The poem starts with a painting-like landscape in the Chinese style with each natural element “one granite ridge,” “a tree,” “a rock,” “a creek,” “a bark,” “hill beyond hill,” and “a huge moon” merging with the others into a panoramic view of harmony and unity, thus revealing the interdependence of all things. The beauty of the simplicity of nature fills the mind with wonder and invigorates the spiritual link between the mind and the natural landscape.

One granite ridge  
A tree, would be enough  
Or even a rock, a small creek,  
A bark shred in a pool.  
Hill beyond hill, folded and twisted  
Tough trees crammed  
In thin stone fractures  
A huge moon on it all, is too much.  
The mind wanders. A million  
Summers, night air still and the rocks  
Warm. Sky over endless mountains.  
(1–11)

The speaker becomes part of the wilderness, not presiding, but reciprocating and placing himself as another complementary element in the vast natural order. Wendell Berry observes in “A Secular Pilgrimage” that the speaker is “present in the poem finally as another creature, along with the moon, the rock, the juniper and the wild animals.” (Berry 1970: 423) The mind is rendered free from egotism, greed, anger, envy, delusion and other defilements: “All the junk” “Drops away.”

All the junk that goes with being human  
Drops away, hard rock wavers  
Even the heavy present seems to fail  
This bubble of a heart. (12–15)

With these multitudinous impure layers being discarded, the pure essence in the center, the Buddha nature, is, thus, gradually unveiled and sparkles with its long-hidden radiance. The mind becomes clear, achieves a state of emptiness and attains a flash of Zen enlightenment reminiscent of Bāshō’s “An old pond.” At this instant the speaker achieves a fresh perception of emptiness and a sudden insight into the true nature of all phenomena “that / which sees is truly seen.”

A clear, attentive mind  
Has no meaning but that  
Which sees is truly seen. (19–21)

Although the poem depicts the earth as dynamic and flowing “A million / Summers,” “A bark shred in a pool,” “Tough trees crammed,” and “A flick / In the moonlight,” the universal whirl and flow bring the poet to a still point in which silence and stillness permeate the landscape. Silence and stillness in the universe of change underscore the images of the mind emptying itself, the individual ego being erased, and the ultimate truth being revealed in the local place. This is followed by a trail of ascent “Watch me rise,” suggesting the spiritual uplift of the mind.

No one loves rock, yet we are here.  
Night chills. A flick  
In the moonlight  
Slips into Juniper shadow:  
Back there unseen  
Cold proud eyes  
Of Cougar or Coyote  
Watch me rise and go. (22–29)

As apparent in many of his poems, Snyder avoids using the subject pronoun “I” or makes minimum use of it. “Piute Creek” is another excellent example which eradicates anthropocentrism. My close reading of the poem concurs with Yamazato’s interpretation:

... The speaker does not obtrude; he remains hidden in the communal whole. His reference to himself as a separate presence occurs only in the last line, and humanity in this poem functions not as a dominant subject but as an Asian religious vision ... (Yamazato 2007: 1–2)

With the anthropocentric line erased, the speaker sees and understands his identity only when it is filtered through the gaze of a nonhuman “Cougar or Coyote” at the close of the poem. This is because the speaker’s identity has merged with the landscape and he has become part of the natural whole.

Moreover, the poem exhibits the Zen distrust of scholastic learning based on texts and books as well as its objection to abstraction and conceptualization. For the Zen practitioner, the chief goal, according to Daisetz T. Suzuki, is to be “Free from intellectual complexities and moralistic attachments of every description” (*Zen and Japanese Culture* 1973: 17). To achieve enlightenment, intellectualism must be cast off:

Words and books  
Like a small creek off a high ledge  
Gone in the dry air. (16–18)

As for imagery, similar to all the poems earlier discussed in detail, concrete and simple nature images abound and it is noteworthy that nature is not only described as a setting giving a vivid impression of silence but all the elements of nature together function almost as another being dominating the poem and simultaneously embracing the human as part of the whole. Also, like “Magpie” and “We Make Our Vows Together With All Beings,” animal imagery is used and these animals are portrayed not merely as part of the natural whole but they also function as beings akin to humans and capable of attaining Buddhahood.

This last poem is a fitting finale which beautifully interweaves and pictorially illustrates some of the main Zen concepts while simultaneously demonstrating in a vivid manner the personalization of the art of Zen poetry by an American master, Gary Snyder.

## Conclusion

Snyder’s celebration of nature and cosmic interdependence, his emphasis on true perception and his advocacy of the practice of mindfulness in daily life and work, though Buddhist in origin, are articulation

towards wholeness and wholesomeness for people of all faiths and backgrounds. Snyder has looked to the Orient for a positive interaction with fellow humans as well as nonhumans and has suggested an alternative lifestyle based on Eastern spiritual values. His poetry proposes a new canon of spiritual exercise, clearing the path from temporal life to the moment of Enlightenment, the sudden dropping away of the phenomenal world in the contemplation of impermanence and emptiness.

Snyder sees meditation not only as a spiritually nourishing exercise but also as a fundamental human activity. The following statement of Snyder from “The Zen of Humanity” elicits his remarks as to the supremacy of meditation:

I stay with Zen, because sitting, doing zazen, is a primary factor. Sitting is the act of looking-in. Meditation is fundamental ... It’s so fundamental that it’s been with us for forty or fifty thousand years in one form or another. It’s not even something that is specifically Buddhist. It is as fundamental a human activity as taking naps is to wolves, or soaring in circles is to hawks and eagles. It’s how you contact the basics and the base of yourself ... (*The Real Work* 1980: 83)

Snyder’s practice of meditation in life can very well be applied to the practice of concentration in composing poetry for the poet and perusing poetry for the reader. The practice of meditation leads to the realization of a complex web of interrelation. The natural law of interpenetration and interconnectedness is not only at work in the whole universe but also governs Snyder’s poems. Snyder accentuates the interrelatedness and interdependence of all elements in each

poem so that the poem develops naturally and depends not on tension between various elements but on the mutual support they give one another. Meant to be a poetic part of the conclusion, the following poem, a fascinating interplay of “within” and “without,” is an excellent example that interweaves all its technical elements and fuses these elements with the Buddhist notions encrypted in the poem.

**Without**

the silence  
of nature  
within.

the power within.  
the power

without.

the path is whatever passes—no  
end in itself.

the end is,  
grace—ease—

healing,  
not saving.

*singing*  
the proof

the proof of the power within.

In recognizing “the power within,” in fusing action with contemplation, in merging physical activity with mindful meditation, in interweaving all poetic elements and their intrinsic meanings into one entity, in revealing abstract Buddhist notions by means of concrete images, Snyder’s poetry opens up a new horizon in the literary realm. Through his short verse which encrypts Eastern ethics beneath Eastern artistic style, Snyder has

created a new kind of poetry with a new ethic, a new aesthetic, a new direction in American literature.

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