

Zen Buddhism and Contemporary North American Poetry

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The re-emergence of Zen Buddhist poetry in contemporary North American literature has been widespread and prominent in the last two decades. This interest in and adherence to Zen thought and practice has not been seen since the Beat Generation, when poets brought Buddhism to the forefront of their writings. However, today, communities of poets, especially the postlanguage poets, have combined the spirituality of Zen with the aesthetic of poetry, resulting in innovative and experimental modes of creative production. This study seeks to unravel this recent overlap of the spiritual and the aesthetic in order to identify current trends and possible future directions of American poetry.

Poetry Today

Poetry has, has had, and always will have its critics, but critics today have a specific and disturbing complaint: that poetry no longer has a place in our pop culture, digital world. It is reserved for the academy and its over-caffeinated scholars hunched over cluttered desks littered with dusty books. The critics claim poetry has become too erudite and overly complicated for the general population and, therefore, is obsolete. However, what these critics have failed to realize is that poetry has merged and fused with contemporary America. As long as the American people have interest in the genuine, then poetry will persist. In an article published in the *Boston Review*, Hank Lazer writes, “The critics have a point. Contemporary American poetry is atomized, decentralized, and multi-faceted, and the range of poetries and audiences is too varied to capture” (3).¹ While the traditional notion of poetry

¹ Lazer, Hank. “The People’s Poetry.” *The Boston Review*. 12 July 2006 <bostonreview.net/BR29/lazer.html>

exists in the hands of the academy, current American poetry has taken new and exciting turns. Lazer contends, “Perhaps, contrary to the laments, we are now living through a particularly rich time in American poetry – an era of radically democratized poetry” (3). Expression through poetry today is divided across the continent among several subgroups of poets who are manipulating language in a variety of unique ways. It is democratized into communities of artists who are not only using the written and spoken word in traditional forms and structures but are also pushing language to new limits in ways that have never been seen or heard before.

Today, poetry is re-invented through hybridity, the act of combining and fusing poetic language with other media of expression. For example, poetry is no longer restricted to the page but is now born out of new media such as film, html, flash, performance, and sound. Different groups everywhere are experimenting with and enjoying language in new and varied ways by blending artistic and even some non-artistic techniques, styles, and methods, resulting in new modes of hybrid composition. This interest in hybridity has opened the door to unbridled experimentalism. In a recent article, Mark Wallace suggests that hybridity characterizes the work of current postlanguage poets including Lazer, Leslie Scalapino, Lyn Hejinian, and even Charles Bernstein, one of the major figures of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E movement. He suggests that hybridity is “the great emphasis in postlanguage work on mixing traditions, crossing boundaries, and critiquing notions of form as pure or singular” (10).² The hybrid forms and styles of the postlanguage poets are constantly evolving as they combine varied forms, styles, media, and modes of thought. Moreover, a hybrid overlap of the spiritual and the aesthetic has been especially notable in the writings produced by the postlanguage poets, many of them having a particular and passionate interest in Zen Buddhism. This adherence to Zen thought represented in poetry has not been prominent since the Beat Generation when writers like Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac brought Buddhist perspectives to the forefront of their writings.

American Poets and Zen

It is a surprising phenomenon, really, the transpacific journey of Zen Buddhism and its transplantation into American culture. During its stay in America, Zen has had many faces; it has been serious, academic, spiritual,

² Wallace, Mark. “Definitions in Process, Definitions as Process/Uneasy Collaborations: Language and the Postlanguage Poetries.” *Flashpoint Magazine*. 15 June 2005 <<http://www.flashpointmag.com/postlang.htm>>

artistic, and even trendy. However, the true mystery lies in *why* American artists and poets have been so receptive to Zen, a mode of spirituality, thought, and practice from the other side of the world. It seems unusual that Zen thought and practice would be so widely accepted in an increasingly xenophobic American culture preoccupied with war in the Middle East and ceaseless debates over immigration laws. Nevertheless, in such a critical time for American art and poetry in the twenty-first century, Zen has found an unlikely home.

In 2005, Andrew Schelling published a concise yet complete anthology called *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry*. This anthology includes an array of Buddhist poems written by living poets.³ Schelling writes that his anthology is “a gathering of contemporary, living poets, and contains recent work, much of which appears in book format here for the first time” (xv)⁴. Some of the writers included are Scalapino, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Diane DiPrima, Gary Snyder, Shin Yu Pai, Norman Fischer, and Eliot Weinberger. Schelling comments on the anthologized selections: “Some of it is the mature work of long-seasoned practitioners, some of it the opening work of young writers just now publishing their first books” (xv).

Lazer, a practicing zennist, responded with “Reflections on *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry*,” published in *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. In this article, Lazer discusses the nature of contemporary Buddhist poetry within the context of modern-day America. He argues that the essence of Buddhist poetry is nontotalizable, meaning that it is unable to be bound by definition (9).⁵ Modern Buddhist poetry resists the constraints of exactitude and definitiveness; it refuses conclusiveness. The idea that Zen poetry resists definition coincides with Wallace’s characterization of postlanguage poets. He believes that “many postlanguage writers refuse to fit singular and identifiable categories, in some cases even switching forms and influences radically . . . a tendency which makes them hard to anthologize, generalize, or even critique in more than individual cases or small groups” (10).

³ With the exception of Philip Whalen whose works are published here posthumously.

⁴ *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry*. Ed. Andrew Schelling. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005.

⁵ Lazer, Hank. “Reflections on *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry*.” *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*. Vol. 32-33. Summer/Fall 2006.

Zen Buddhism, as a mode of spirituality, is highly reliant on the individual as it is primarily non-dogmatic. Enlightening states of mind can be experienced in a multitude of ways; each journey is unique and irreproducible. One person may experience an enlightening or intensified moment of awareness while meditating in a Buddhist cultural center while another person may experience it while sitting in bumper-to-bumper traffic looking at the big blue sky. While these experiences are different from one another, one is not more valuable or legitimate than the other, since they both lead to some higher level of consciousness, a particularized moment of being. Such is the nontotalizable nature of Buddhist poetry; as a total body of poetry, it cannot be captured by a single definition. It is vast and variegated, and the beauty of Schelling's work lies in the variety of texts which he provides. The reader is exposed to writing styled after traditional Buddhist forms in addition to unconventional and experimental modes of poetry.

The Zen Aesthetic

Schelling articulates that "poetry actually carries you or transports you" (3). "To where?" is the essential question. Lazer suggests that the poetic process is a path. Poetry is a pathway which can lead to a deeper and richer understanding. He says that "it is a realization of the oblique present tense grace of the experience of poetic practice itself" (15). However, the exact destination of this path is impossible to determine. It will be different for each poet and each audience upon each reading. Even re-reading the same poem will lead to a different place, a new thought, a new experience. Each breath taken and every passing moment are new and irreproducible. Buddhism and poetry share a homeomorphous relationship in that each of them separately is amorphous, existing outside the borders of materiality and regulation. Since there are no absolute rules, the door is open for *almost* anything.

While Zen lends itself to experimentalism and a wide variety of possibilities, it does not necessarily mean that "anything goes." In a collection of essays entitled *This is it*, Alan Watts criticizes those artists who use Zen as an excuse "to justify the indiscriminate framing of simply anything – blank canvases, totally silent music, torn up bits of paper ... or dense masses of mangled wire" (94).⁶ While he recognizes the value in "the profound willingness to listen to or gaze upon anything at all that frees the

⁶ Watts, Alan. "Beat Zen, Square Zen." *This is it*. New York: Vintage, 1973.

mind from fixed perceptions of beauty,” he does not consider this type of production to be art. Art requires skill and thought. Watts does, however, point out that there are Zen artists who have learned to control accidents such as in Japanese calligraphy and ceramics. He says, “According to Zen feeling there is no precise rule ... which can be formulated in words and taught systemically. On the other hand, there is in all things a principle of order ... termed *li*” (96). In Chinese philosophy, *li* refers to the organic patterns which occur in nature, and *te*, in Taoist philosophy, refers to the ability to recognize and capture the unrestrained beauty of *li*. Watts describes it as “the element of the miraculous which we feel both at the stars in heaven and at our own ability to be conscious” (97). He argues that it is the possession of *te* which distinguishes art from everything else.

The nontotalizable nature of Buddhism lends itself to open-mindedness and open-endedness and, therefore, allows poets to experience *te* and graceful acts of the mind resulting in creative outlets for and creative outputs of poetic expression. In an interview with Jeffrey Side, Lazer points out, “I think that at a fundamental level we are talking about ways of thinking and living that remain open, that are not so much fixated on answers as on process. In the case of Buddhism, I suspect that it is its non-dogmatic (or non-totalizable) nature that many American poets (particularly those of an innovative or experimental affinity) have found so appealing.”⁷ Postlanguage poets, characterized by their refusal of finality, have embraced Eastern notions such as those of Zen Buddhism (and some of Taoism) because these forms of spirituality are open to process (*wu-wei*) and avoid absolutes.

An Off-Rhyme Relationship

However, while nontotalizability is important in discussing Zen poetry, it does not explain the entire correlative nature between Zen and contemporary North American poetics. A historical perspective is also necessary. In April of 1987, about thirty poets and zennists met at Green Gulch Zen Center north of San Francisco for a weekend of Zen and poetry. The gathering was called “The Poetics of Emptiness: A Collaborative Gathering of Poets who Meditate.” Among those in attendance were Gary Snyder, Norman Fischer, Philip Whalen, Anne Waldman, Charles Bernstein, Gail Sher, and Jane Hirshfield. Schelling writes about this event in the preface to his anthology, “Over that weekend a collection of nine writers – some of them urban based experimental writers, some representative of

⁷ Lazer, Hank. Interviewed by Jeffrey Side. *The Argotist Online*. 1 July 2006 <<http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Lazer%20interview.htm>>

rural or backwoods poetry styles, others with no particular affiliation to a school or scene – meditated together, ate together, and spent the days and evenings thinking and talking about Buddhist practice and the discipline of writing Buddhist poems” (xiv). Many of the conversations and speeches that occurred at Green Gulch were documented in an edition of *Jimmy and Lucy’s House of “K”* called “The Poetics of Emptiness.” These talks illustrate the off-rhyme relationship of Zen and poetry, drawing on discipline, practice, and mindfulness as congruous connections.

Writing poetry demands awareness, an intensified level of consciousness more transcendent than the average mode of the mind. It occurs in a moment, the poet’s mind conversing with the world through the pen and onto the page. In her new book *The Public World/Syntactically Impermanence*, Leslie Scalapino attempts to unravel the metaphysical and metatemporal aspects of poetry in order to illustrate the connectedness of Zen and writing. She writes, “the syntax and the structure duplicates the process of the reader’s own mind-phenomena ... the nature of the present is only disjunctive, the times occurring separately are at the same time” (4).⁸ She refers to “a moment” as the conjunction and disjunction of past, present, and future merging together but occurring separately simultaneously. Despite the circuitous and convoluted wording, her argument is sensible in that she is discussing metatemporality in terms of the Western linear approach to time. One of Scalapino’s contemporaries, Norman Fischer, Zen priest and poet, seems to arrive at the same conclusion but in a less tortuous manner in the preface to his new volume of poetry *I Was Blown Back*. He writes, “I never date my poems, imagining them I suppose to exist in some extra-temporal zone, which is how it feels when I am writing them, as if the words were coming from elsewhere, or at least nowhere.”⁹ Scalapino also argues a sort of binary relationship between mindfulness and mindlessness which occurs in writing, “The poetry is ventriloquism that ... is actual conversation. ... It occurs by simply giving up one’s mind; yet one can’t do that in order to write it” (5-11). As she delves into the philosophy of experimental poetics, she dances around Zen themes but rather complicates them beyond themselves. The relationship between Zen and poetry is probably much simpler.

Scalapino asserts that writing requires one to give up one’s mind; Zen would teach that it requires one *not* to give up his or her *mind* but to give up his or her *ego*. According to the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, one must sacrifice the ego in order to reach nirvana. Buddhists would never

⁸ Scalapino, Leslie. *The Public World/Syntactically Impermanence*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1999.

⁹ Fischer, Norman. *I Was Blown Back*. San Diego: Singing Horse, 2005.

teach mindlessness. In fact, mindfulness and awareness are their primary goals, and a method of *practice* to move towards this consciousness is meditation. As any Buddhist would tell you, pure mindfulness and awareness are difficult to achieve. People cycle in and out of intensified levels of consciousness, but the objective is to remain in a heightened state of awareness as long as possible. Similar to this level of mindfulness is John Keats' theory of negative capability, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason – ... the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration."¹⁰ This amplified state of mind requires practice, very focused and concentrated practice. Letting go of one's ego, human intentions, and complications can allow the poem simply to occur, to come into its own as an art form manifesting the bizarre yet ordinary mindful phenomena. Fischer observes, "Like characters in a novel, or intimate friends, my poems seem to have minds of their own, and to draw me toward insights and intentions I would never have had if left to my own devices."

Good, high quality writing, like meditation, requires practice. An aspiring writer cannot simply pump out a Pulitzer-worthy book without first refining his or her skill and studying the works of those who came before. Gail Sher, a poet in attendance at Green Gulch, says, "The crucial word is practice. For me writing was a practice with the same spirit of attending periods of zazen. ... the context in which my writing takes place is derived from Zen practice" (5)¹¹. In a sense (whether it be the Buddhist sense or not) all poets meditate. Jane Hirshfield contends, "Poetry is zazen in language. ... Zazen and poetry are each deeply intimate paths, self becoming self, true nature's expression" (5-6).¹² Thus, practice serves as an essential link between Zen and writing. However, it is not only practice to perfect a skill or talent but practice to reach a purer and truer state of mind. Paul Repts and Nyogen Senzaki write in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones* that practice is "[t]he Zen habit of self-searching through meditation to realize one's true nature, with disregard to formalism, with insistence on self-discipline" (18).¹³

Scalapino pays special attention to the conjunctive/disjunctive nature of the "moment" in writing, when the poet transcribes the intangibles of the

¹⁰ Keats, John. *Keats' Negative Capability*. 15 July 2006 < <http://www.mrbauld.com/negcap.html>>

¹¹ Sher, Gail. *Jimmy and Lucy's House of "K."* vol. 9. 1989.

¹² Hirshfield, Jane. *Jimmy and Lucy's House of "K."* vol. 9. 1989.

¹³ Repts, Paul and Nyogen Senzaki. *Zen Flesh Zen Bones*. Boston: Tuttle, 1988.

mind into something material with ink on paper. Reps and Senzaki say, “Zen is ... an experience” (18). The writing experience occurs in the moment; a sense of spontaneity prevails in that each thought, each phrase, each poem that is written is new. It comes and then it goes as it leaves the mind and is penned into language. Hirshfield suggests, “When we enter zazen everything is new – no breath repeats. Each poem is new. Without judging, breath and language arise and pass. ... The true poems are effortless efforts, ... but how many hours of painful knees must live in them” (6).

Elegant twists of the mind unfold naturally during meditation and the writing process, as if they simply *happen* spontaneously with the natural order of the universe. Spontaneity becomes an essential element in Zen poetry. That which is spontaneous arises from a natural inclination or impulse independent of external constraints. Spontaneity all at once intensifies and relieves the tension between that which is unknown and that which will transpire. It is the moment of happening. So much of the Buddhist (and the writing) experience is dependent upon the moment and that which occurs within the moment. In Chinese Taoist philosophy, this would be called *wu-wei*. Yi-Ping Ong writes in her introduction to Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* that *wu-wei* is an “intuitive cooperation with the natural order, which is perfect and harmonious when left to work without the interference of ignorant human action” (xviii).¹⁴ In *The Tao of Pooh*, Benjamin Hoff’s views of *wu-wei* are in concordance with Hirshfield’s beliefs about zazen and writing. Hoff suggests that *wu-wei* “evolves from the inner sensitivity to the natural rhythm of things. ... When we learn to work with our own Inner Nature, and with the natural laws operating around us, we reach the level of *Wu Wei*. Then we work with the natural order of things and operate on the principle of minimal effort” (68-69).¹⁵ This is likely what Hirshfield means by “effortless efforts.” In another speech at the Green Gulch event, Gary Snyder stated, “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” (12).¹⁶ Poetry becomes the outlet for the unutterable, exquisite acts of the mind; it is the bridge between language and abstraction.

¹⁴ Ong, Yi Ping. Introduction. *Tao Te Ching*. By Lao Tzu. Trans. Charles Muller New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005.

¹⁵ Hoff, Benjamin. *The Tao of Pooh*. New York: Penguin, 1982.

¹⁶ Snyder, Gary. *Jimmy and Lucy’s House of “K.”* vol. 9. 1989.

The Psychedelic Controversy

While focused practice of zazen is the traditional route to enlightenment, some Zen practitioners believe that the use of certain psychedelic substances can create mental states and mystical experiences similar to the effects that meditation produces. In an essay titled “The New Alchemy,” Watts chronicles his experiences with mescaline and lysergic acid diethylamide (also known as LSD). He contends that “they induce states of mind remarkably similar to cosmic consciousness” (128).¹⁷ While clearly a proponent of drug use as a spiritual aid, he brings up several interesting counter-arguments which challenge his stance. Watts points out that “mystical experience seems altogether too easy when it simply comes out of a bottle” and that if drugs produce enlightening states of mind, then “spiritual insight is after all only a matter of body chemistry involving a total reduction of the spiritual to the material” (128).¹⁷ However, in response, he asserts, “States akin to mystical experience arise only in certain individuals and then often depend upon considerable concentration and effort to use the change in consciousness in certain ways” (129).

While Watts may be correct that only experienced practitioners can harness the affected state of mind into a usable spiritual experience, there seems to be a level of artificiality connected to altering the brain’s natural chemical state in order to approach the divine. This is not to say that drugs, especially psychedelics, are not effective for other purposes whether recreational, scientific, or artistic. Watts indicates that an important use of hallucinogenic substances is “as an instrumental aid to the creative artist, thinker, or scientist” (130). According to his accounts, these types of drugs can give the sense of transcending time and materiality, very much coinciding with the goals and the philosophy of Zen. However, more conservative Zen practitioners may frown upon the lawless nature of using drugs, even to achieve a spiritual end. The rejection of drug use in religious practice is probably more political and moral than anything else.

Perhaps the spiritual revelation itself is not derived from the substance but rather from its cultural significance. For example, Southwestern American Indian tribes have used peyote in their traditional religious practices for generations. Similarly, although classical Buddhists did not use LSD, they did have their fair share of practices involving the use of natural substances. In an essay/poem titled “Amrta: The Neuropharmacology of Nirvana,” Dale Pendell discusses the use of consciousness-altering drugs such as *Psilocybe cubensis* (also known as mushrooms) and *Cannabis sativa*

¹⁷ Watts, Alan. “The New Alchemy.” *This is it*. New York: Vintage, 1973.

(also known as marijuana) in traditional Indian yogic practices. Substance use has had a long and illustrious lineage in the Zen writing tradition. Li Po, one of the most preeminent poets of the High T'ang (along with Wang Wei and Tu Fu), wrote some of his most famous pieces while intoxicated. David Hinton states in his preface to *The Selected Poems of Li Po* that many of the classical Chinese poets would drink “just enough so that the ego fades and perception is clarified” (xv).¹⁸ This habit continued all the way into the heavy drug use and alcohol consumption of the Beat Generation and is still showing its face in contemporary Zen practice and writing. Nevertheless, the question remains whether or not psychedelics or other substances undermine the validity of the spiritual experience. One thing is certain, and Pendell says it best, “the salient feature of entheogens in American Buddhism at present is memorial: that many Americans were attracted to Buddhism in the first place because of psychedelic revelations” (231).¹⁹

Trendy Zen

Pendell's analysis makes Zen seem more like a fad than a serious spiritual path; however, and perhaps unfortunately, it is undeniable that Buddhism has become a trendy hallmark of American society. Asian culture is assimilating into American culture on a grand scale. Asian diets have become especially trendy and yoga is taught at virtually every gym across America. Most decent-sized cities have meditation centers, and Barnes and Noble bookstores even have a section dedicated to Eastern spirituality. Asian influence is permeating the West.

Even though popular America is in the process of Asianization, Zen has been a cornerstone in the American counterculture for half a century. This can be largely attributed to the writers and artists of the Beat Generation. When the Beats haphazardly stumbled upon Buddhism and brought its ideals to the forefront of their writings, little did they know that they were profoundly impacting the American literary tradition. Schelling writes in the preface to his anthology, “One can't overstate the impact Ginsberg and Cage had on bringing Buddhist practice and thought into authentic discussions of modern poetry. Their influence compelled not only poets but academic critics and book reviewers to recognize Buddhist ideas as central

¹⁸ Hinton, David. Preface. *The Selected Poems of Li Po*. Trans. Hinton. New York: New Directions, 1996.

¹⁹ Pendell, Dale. “The Neuropharmacology of Nirvana.” *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry*. Ed. Andrew Schelling. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005.

to American poetry” (xiv). Nor can one forget Ginsberg’s good friend Jack Kerouac and his revolutionary impact on American Zen writing.

Ginsberg and Kerouac accidentally found themselves on the Zen path after fortuitous mistakes in public libraries. Rick Fields describes their experiences in *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*. According to Fields, Ginsberg happened upon a book about Buddhism in the New York Public Library and felt a strong connection with its teachings. From then onward, he pursued studies of Eastern spirituality. Similarly, Kerouac fell in love with Zen in a public library. He went to the library with the intention to read Thoreau, planning to “cut out from civilization, and go back and live in the woods” after writing his semi-autobiographical novel *The Subterraneans*, chronicling a desperate love affair (Fields 210).²⁰ As he read, he noticed that Thoreau was constantly referencing Hindu philosophy. So he put down Thoreau to find a book on Hinduism but instead unexpectedly happened upon a book called *The Life of Buddha*. With a newfound, shared interest in Buddhist thought, Ginsberg and Kerouac corresponded by mail, writing back and forth about what they were thinking and what they had learned. These writings can be found in the collection *Some of the Dharma*.

In March of 1955, Ginsberg read his most famous poem, “Howl,” at the Six Gallery in San Francisco. Here, he met Kenneth Rexroth, a self-taught translator of Chinese and Japanese poetry, who introduced him to Gary Snyder, a student at Berkeley and a forerunner in the backwoods, naturalistic style of Zen poetry. In turn, Ginsberg introduced Kerouac to Snyder, and a community of Zen poets and friends was born on the West Coast of America. In the spring of 1956, Kerouac lived with Snyder in San Francisco and documented their experiences together in the semi-fictional novel *The Dharma Bums*, which popularized Zen, particularly with the American bohemian counterculture. After the San Francisco Renaissance, Zen became associated with underground artistic and intellectual communities.

Watts draws the distinction between this trendy form of Zen, which he calls “Beat Zen,” and *true* Zen. The American counterculture associated Zen with the rebellion against American conformity as demonstrated by the Beats. Therefore, Zen became a license for them to exercise their disdain for the political and social milieu of America, a confusion of spirituality with politics, art, and society in which the true identity of Zen became distorted. Watts says that “the Bohemian way of life ... is ... a symptom of creative changes in manners and morals which at first seem as reprehensible to

²⁰ Fields, Rick. *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*. 3rd ed. Boston: Shambala Publications, 1992.

conservatives as new forms in art” (99). He contends that this resulted in a type of person like “the cool, fake-intellectual hipster searching for kicks, name dropping bits of Zen and jazz jargon to justify a disaffiliation from society which is in fact just ordinary, callous exploitation of other people” (101). While many writers of this period were zennists, Zen necessitated neither their separation from society nor their abandonment of convention. Their rebellion was a *genuine* reaction to the stifling conformity of the American 1950’s. Zen was a way in which they could turn inward and spiritually deal with their beliefs and their distaste for American politics, society, etc. “Beat Zen,” on the other hand, uses Zen to justify rebellion.

Watts also points out the problem of drug use among those who have adhered to Zen as something that is trendy and fashionable. He says, “In these circles the smoking of marijuana is . . . defiance of square authority. . . . [I]t is a matter of symbolic principle, as distinct from the enforcement of rational law” (102). Once again, Zen becomes an excuse for the counterculture to challenge authority, to demonstrate their separation from the rest of society. When practiced in this manner, Zen is reduced from a mode of serious spirituality to a selfish justification for acting against the established moral, social, political, and even religious conventions of the time. From “Beat Zen” to the Punk/Rock movement to Hollywood, Americans have used Buddhism to proclaim and emphasize their individuality. This is not to say that Americans do not have a genuine interest in Zen, but their perception of it may be obfuscated or slightly confused.

Poetry Tomorrow

Eastern tradition has had a profound influence in many areas of American culture and has served as a spiritual and artistic outlet for zennists and writers across the country. The philosophy of Zen theoretically and aesthetically fits with contemporary poetics and its current tendency towards hybridity and experimentalism. Zen poetry, a hybrid overlap of language and spirituality, has proven to be a particularly rich and inspiring subgenre of contemporary American poetry and will probably lead to new and exciting creative outputs in the future. While the divided and democratized nature of present day poetry may be troublesome to describe and categorize, the beauty of the situation lies in the colorful variety of how poets today are using language in creative ways which challenge tradition and expand the possibilities for artistic production. The critics complain that poetry is inaccessible, but America’s poets are busy reinventing it through hybrid innovation and making it available to the people. Poetry today is rich, and poetry tomorrow will continue to be so as long as humanity is still in search of the genuine heart of nature, the intangible, ever-elusive truth. For American Buddhist poets and their readers, the journey is irreproducible. The twists are unexpected. Each moment is an opportunity.

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