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**ZEN BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES AS PROJECTED
IN THE POETICAL**

WORKS OF GARY SNYDER: AN APPRAISAL**DR. S. CHELLIAH, M.A. Ph.D.****PROFESSOR, HEAD & CHAIRPERSON****SCHOOL OF ENGLISH & FOREIGN LANGUAGES****SCHOOL OF INDIAN LANGUAGES,****DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH &****COMPARATIVE LITERATURE****MADURAI KAMARAJ UNIVERSITY****MADURAI****INDIA****Abstract**

This paper, at the outset, lays focus on the religious philosophy of Goutama Buddha and the system of doctrines and practice built up by the followers of Buddha. Gary Snyder is one of the notable poets who has had keen immense faith in principles of Zen Buddhism and he described the entire universe as a human family. This article also highlights the function of Zen Buddhism and concludes by stating Snyder's love of simplicity, his respect for nature, his direct focus on the reality of experience in life all agreed with the Zen Buddhist spirit.

Buddhism is the religion-philosophy built up round the teaching of Goutama, the Buddha. The very purpose of Buddhism is a state of Consciousness known as 'Enlightenment'. Buddhism is commonly described as one of the great religions of the world but it is not in the ordinary sense of the term 'religion'. Buddhism is nothing but a system of doctrines and practice built up by the followers of Buddha about which they believed to be his teaching. Bodhidharma, an Indian philosopher, arrived in China in the middle of the sixth Century A.D and became the founder of the Zen School of Buddhism.

Zen, a corruption of the Chinese Ch'an, which is in turn, a corruption of the Sanskrit word, 'Dhyana' is a Japanese term for that Wisdom-Power-Compassion which lies beyond all words and cannot be confined in the largest 'ism'. It is the Light in the darkness of avidya, Ignorance, the Life within all changing, perishable forms. It is the meaning in circumstance. It is at once "the Life, the Truth and the Way" (Humpherys 1). It's origin, of course, is the Buddha's Enlightenment, for as the whole of Zen Buddhism exists as a vehicle for this direct Enlightenment, there would without it no Zen Buddhism and in this present world of avidya, ignorance, no zen" (P25). Buddha's Enlightenment is the seed from which Zen Buddhism

sprang. It begins where the intellect leaves off, and forms an intellectual technique for intuitive, direct 'seeing into one's own nature'. In the words of the Suzuki, "Zen was the Chinese revolt against Buddhism Later, Zen became a genuinely Chinese form of Buddhism" (P32).

Zen Buddhism is not a religion in the sense that the term is popularly understood; for Zen has no God to worship, no ceremonial rites to observe, no future abode to which the dead are destined, and last of all, Zen has no soul whose welfare is to be looked after by somebody else and whose immortality is a matter of intense concern with some people. Zen is free from all these dogmatic and religious encumbrances" (P43). As Professor Whitehead has put it, "It is the vision of something which stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things; something which is a remote possibility and yet the greatest of present facts; something that gives meaning to all that passes and yet eludes apprehension; something whose possession is the final good and yet is beyond all reach; something which is the ultimate ideal and the hopeless quest" (P44). Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy described Zen Buddhism as the more philosophical and mystical aspect of the Mahayana, and as essentially indifferent to iconolatry and scriptural authority. In his words "This phase of Mahayana is little determined by special forms, and can scarcely be said to have another creed than that the kingdom of heaven is the heart of man. This school of thought most fully represents the Mahayana as a world of religion" (254).

The Indian Philosopher, Bodhidharma who is believed to be the founder of Zen Buddhism rightly laid an emphasis on his four propositions which summarise his purpose and technique. They are made clear in the following lines:

"A Special transmission outside the Scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Direct pointing to the soul of man;
Seeing into one's own nature" (P32).

In brief, a direct transmission of the wisdom without depending on words and the direct seeing into one's own nature may be the essential philosophical notion of Zen Buddhism.

Commonly Speaking, Zen Buddhism has certain such essential characteristics as simplicity, naturalness, spontaneity, direct experience of reality, unaffected way of life, intuitive and right understanding of things, abolition of subject-object distinction, sympathy and compassion for all living things, necessity to live in close communion with Nature, avoidance of abstractions and arriving at insights, understanding of widespread suffering,

above all, attainment of Enlightenment. Which make a perfect Zen elixir of life. Gary Snyder is one of the notable poets who have had keen interest and immense faith in the accepted and well-understood principles of Zen Buddhism. The fact that Snyder has been a serious student of this Zen Buddhist Philosophy is well-understood from the statement of Ann Charters: “Gary Snyder had been studying Japanese for three years, preparing for his trip to a Zen monastery. He was also translating the Chinese poet Han-Shan---“(P238).

Gary Snyder, after his graduate studies in 1956, left for Japan with a scholarship to study at the First Zen Institute of America and thereby attended lectures delivered by eminent scholars on Zen Buddhist Philosophy so as to sharpen his sensibility and deepen his Zen way of life. He whole-heartedly look to the study of Zen Buddhism with Oda sesso Roshi, a spiritual teacher until the latter’s death in September 1966. Snyder began his life-long practice of Zen Buddhism which acted as the most significant influence on him as ‘man and poet’.

As a true Zen buddhist, Snyder takes up the theme of widespread suffering in his poem “A stone Garden” collected in **Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems** and shows how it assumes the forms of oldage, disease and death – the forms which Gautama found disturbing. He talks of death in these lines:

“----- the crying plover,
 For babies grown and childhood homes
 And moving, moving, on through scenes and towns
 Weep for the crowds of men
 Like birds gone south forever.

The going south of birds for ever signifies peoples having died. The poet depicts the theme of death and suffering like his contemporary, Allen Ginsberg who takes the theme of suffering in his poem ‘My Alba’ and ‘Sakyamuni coming out from the Mountain’ collected in his book **Reality Sandwiches**. In ‘My Alba’, the speaker talks of the suffering he has encountered in his life and the ways in which he has reacted to them. In ‘Sakyamuni Coming out from the Mountain’, he talks of the pain that coming to life after death involves. Sakyamuni is made to realise that the world is a home of pain and suffering. It is in order to depict such a mood that the poet makes Sakyamuni a miserable man and describes him as:

“He drags his barefeet
 out of a cave
 under a tree

eye brows

grown long with weeping ---“ (P9).

Zen Buddhism acts as a force on the mind of Snyder. His friend Philip Whalen became a Rishi in a formal man, whereas Snyder is a Zen Buddhist in temperament, disposition and actual appearance without receiving any formal orders. The Zen influence continues to pervade all his works. Casualness, relaxed consciousness, seeing life spontaneously, direct response to things, a poised mind, uninhibited perceptions, genuine concern to be near the well-springs of life make a perfect zen elixir of life. Being responsive to all these, Snyder has developed a broad cross-cultural base to follow life in all its dimensions. The poem, “Nooksack Valley” may be taken as one in which Snyder’s zen vision gets reflected for which he writes:

---- The dog

Turns and turns, stops and sleeps.

The dog is a casual occurrence but this has a unique place in Snyder’s scheme of life because Snyder hails from the tradition of Zen Buddhism where everything has significance. This poem has to be understood in the light of Snyder’s preoccupation with Zen and eco-mysticism. In the words of Bob Steuding, Snyder is a practicing Zen Buddhist. He lives simply and in typical Zen Buddhist style, he is a man of action who responds directly and forcefully to personal encounters. Neither optimistic nor pessimistic, he strikes the observer as frank, straight forward cheerful, compassionate but disciplined and not sentimental, he throws himself totally and without reservation into activities once he has made a decision” (53). What does Snyder exactly mean by Zen ? It can be interpreted in four ways:

- I. Zen may indicate egolessness
- II. It can mean mindlessness
- III. It can represent unifying relation with all things.
- IV. It may mean enlightenment and a pasture of meditation
where a reflection upon life is deeply made.

For Snyder, Zen is a comprehensive term indicating life. The poet makes a request to look beyond every limited thing. Beyond everything, may mean going to the essence of things. The poem ‘Gen’ in **Turtle Island** may be cited as an example for this trait. Materialism is said to have made ‘self-interest’ the supreme rule in life only when man responds to nature,

he recovers the poise of love and sympathy. Human relationship is a nourished by love. But this love cannot be created by artificial means Love springs from the voice of imagination. Snyder is of the view that man and nation must be more imaginative and less rational in their attitude to things:

Solitary the People !

Standing Tree People !

Flying Bird People !

Swimming Sea People !

Four-legged, two-legged People ! (Mother Earth)

Here in these lines, Snyder shows profound sympathy for all creatures. Man is incomplete if not showing profound love & sympathy to all creatures who are called 'people' by Snyder. The poet's insight is that creatures are not a low grade in creation and so he addresses them as people. He endows them with a dignified human status which needs to be studied and understood in the light of his interest in Zen Buddhism. In the poem "Without" collected in **Turtle Island**, the poet hints a difference between healing and saving because 'healing' is an inner process whereas saving requires an external agent. In Snyder's words, the salvation of man lies within and not without. All resources are hidden in man. This is a Zen Buddhist idea which indicates that external power has no abiding value and it is only the internal strength which has the capacity to heal things.

The very purpose of Zen is to seek enlightenment for oneself and to help others attain it. Zen may occasionally appear too enigmatic, cryptic and full of contradictions but it is after all a simple discipline and teaching

To do goods

To avoid evils,

To purify one's own heart,

This is the Buddha-way".

Is this not applicable to all human situations, modern as well as ancient, Western as well as Eastern ?

Direct experience of reality is a major idea in the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. It comes by a profound awareness which involves going beyond all barriers erected by senses, passions and intellect. In direct experience of reality, intuition gives a thrust to the

experience. The following lines from “meeting the mountains” in *Regarding Wave* can be taken as an example to prove this point:

“He turns to a trapped pool
 Puts both hands in the water
 Puts one foot in the pool
 Drops pebbles in the pool
 He slaps the water surface with both hands
 He cries out, rises up and stands
 Facing toward the torrent and the mountain
 Raises up both hands and shout three times” (P1).

A concrete experience is what seems to be the substance of this poem. Everything is known only in contact with things directly. The trouble of going to the pool and dropping pebbles in it is an act of expressing wonder and warm response to things. The whole vein of the poem is in a sensuous, concrete understanding and experience of things around. But the experience has the main support of intuition that helps one to achieve concrete contact with nature and leads one to a new awareness of life and experience.

Snyder aims at an intuitive form of knowledge quite different from rational knowledge. In intuitive knowledge, things become one whereas in rational knowledge, things conflict and appear to be contradictory. An intuitive power of becoming one with things is indicated neatly below in *Fire in the Hole*’:

That the mind
 entered the tip of steel,
 The arm fell
 like breath
 the valley, reeling
 on the pivot of that drill” (*The Back Country* 12).

These lines describe an experience of stillness in which all the human limbs are relaxed mind enters into communion with things and so it has deep rest.

Zen Buddhism lays emphasis upon direct awareness of things. Direct awareness means total experience in which no factor is left out. Snyder comments on a particular type of experience which makes him remember many things simultaneously. The following lines from the poem “December at Yase” in **The Back Country** may attest to the fact:

I feel ancient, as though I had
Lived many lives (BC 49)

The poet passes through an experience which makes him realise a simultaneous co-existence of his life lived at different times. There is an experience of ancientness which indicates deep intensity of keeping him at home with a certain reality of life.

One of the important functions of Zen Buddhism is to highlight the intensity of experience, without which human mind cannot acquire a poise of tranquillity and silence. The lines from “Six Years” given below picture rather neatly an experience of depth, intensity and identification with things:

day dodging sun
Zigzagging barefoot
on blistering rocks
to dive, skim under reefs down along ledges
looking for oysters or snails or at fish
night without blanket
sleeping on sand” (BC 62)

These lines describe an experience of growing awareness with things. There is a projection of human body into the life of rocks. The poet develops a sensibility which puts him in close touch with things around him. His looking for oysters makes him open in his response to things. Penetration into the very life of things and direct contact and intensity with things make total impact on the being of man. This is considered to be a Zen element and this gets well-projected in this poem “Six Years” collected in **The Back Country**. Intuitive experience is another Zen trait operating to go beyond the merely sensuous details of life. It is beautifully described here in lines of the poem “Song of the Cloud”;

“Pile up, Pile up,
our deep-mounting
pleasure in our richness
is not chaos” (RW 13).

Pleasures of senses, according to Snyder, can create distractions whereas mounting pleasure in richness can create an intuitive experience of felicity which keeps the mind in a state of deep awareness of things.

Snyder believes that the process of receiving truth or knowing truth is a complex one. Zen Buddhism states that the truth should be known by getting rid of all mentally constructed plans and schemes. This act is comparable to turning away from things. The very title of the poem “The Truth like the Belly of a women turning” stresses this point. The following lines express truth in a very complex way:

The Truth
like the belly of
a woman turning
always passes by
is always true (P101)

Emily Dickinson puts the same subject in a different way in her poem “Tell the Truth but Tell it Silent”. Just as Emily Dickinson aims at knowing Truth through intuitive awareness, Snyder aims at an intuitive understanding of Truth.

In the poem, “Prayer for the Great Family”, Snyder imagines the entire universe is a human family where there are many members. Mother earth is one member, As the foundation of the universe, it pervades everything. Plants are vital members drawing water from the earth and light from the sun. Air is another member in the family of the universe responsible for diffusing things. Dawn and Dust, Day and Night follow the course. Water is another member in the family on which all birds, animals and plants live. Sun is another member in the family sending its rays to all parts of the universe and the sky is another member whose function is to accommodate billions of stars and other things. The idea of Snyder in describing the entire universe as a human family has its roots from his interest in Zen Buddhism. According to Snyder, Zen Buddhism places its belief in the unity of all things and this is the first premise. The second premise is that all living things are alive. It is in this spirit that he treats sun, water, air, earth with great merit and reverence. No doubt, Snyder humanizes the universe in a typical Zen Buddhist spirit.

Industrial Civilization made life mechanical and highly rational and a result; human life lost its essential meaning very spiritually sensitive people saw the dangerous trend and wanted to correct it by a return to Nature. The ‘return to nature’ is nothing but a return to imagination. Industrialization made a movement towards reason and this was to be balanced by a return to imagination embodied in Nature. Snyder saw the importance of return to nature much more realistically. His return to nature gets manifested in his wandering around mountains, rivers and caves and rocks. He brought a Zen Buddhist dimension to nature which

was totally different from other people's attitude towards Nature. In American civilization, technology reached its peak. Snyder saw this and wanted to rectify it by a more comprehensive Zen Buddhist attitude to Nature.

Nature in Zen Buddhism stands for a unified understanding of everything and all forms of life. The unity of all living things receives a special stree in Zen Buddhist attitude to Nature. Zen Buddhist attitude to Nature means a non-logical, intuitive, imaginative and unified understanding of all things. All thing forms are born from a seed. Snyder says that spirituality is the root of everything. Even the lowly grass contains this seed of spirituality. This Zen outlook has an ecological awareness. Snyder draws inspiration from the Zen ecological view that all forms of life have an inherent internal link and relation. There is no chaos in nature and there is a rhythm in everything.

Snyder is at home with the Zen evolutionary view which states that all forms develop into other life forms. Evolution is based upon change in things. Life is sustained by change. In this respect, all life is change. If everything remains static, there is no improvement in things. There is a line in Upanishad which says 'the eater eating is eaten'. Everything consumes everything else and everything is consumed by everything else. This view shows that life exists profoundly on the basis of change Snyder reflects this ecological sense of Nature.

The Zen element sharpens Snyder's sensibility and provides room for a new scheme of life whenever Snyder watches a thing, he becomes almost one with it. This is a Zen process of achieving intense identity with everything. This Zen element is obvious here in these lines:

"Are other worlds watching us?
The rock alive, not barren
Flowers lichen pinus albicaulis chipmunks
Mice even grass" (EHH 6)

What is implied here is a sacramental vision of things. This means that everything is divine and holy. Snyder feels and says that the rock is alive and not barren. The fact that even rocks and grass have life and sensibility. This a bold Zen philosophical thought that treats every object as reflecting the glory of divine spendour. The poem "Smokey the Bear Sutra" is an example for compassion for all living things and indicates the presence of spirituality in everything.

Thus, Zen Buddhism deepens the significance of life by advocating the adoption of proper perspective in regard to things and all objects of nature. His love of simplicity, his respect for nature, his direct focus on the reality of experience in life, all agree with the Zen axioms and that is why almost all his poetical works project Zen Buddhist views in some way or the other.

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