

Treatment of Buddhism in Modern Poetry

Ram Sarup Sailani

Dr. Ved Prakash

Research Scholar, English, Ph.D

Asstt. Prof. of English

NIILM University, Kaithal

NIILM University, Kaithal

Abstract

In Modern poetry, we come across a numerous instances where we find a close link between Buddhism and some poems written by modern poets like T.S.Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos William and many more. Various techniques used by these poets have a parallel with some gospel as propounded by Buddhist writers. There is no doubt in denying the fact that in modern poets like Philip Larkin and others, we can have a glimpse of what is the core of Buddhist writers.

Paper

Despite its origins in sixth century India, the religion of Buddhism took hold most strongly in China and Japan after it spread there during the Middle Ages. In general, Buddhism teaches that the phenomenal world is a realm of suffering that may only be transcended through meditation and contemplation. The influence of Buddhism and Buddhist ideas on literature has been enormous, especially in medieval east Asia, where Japanese Zen Buddhism—called Ch'an in China—originated.

Zen propounds the ideals of wholeness, harmony, antinationalism, and the dissolution of the self (called *sunyata*, "emptiness" or "egolessness") as a means of reaching a state of spiritual enlightenment, or *satori*. Among the earliest Chinese inspired writers was the Chinese poet Wang Wei (701-761). In his landscape poetry scholars have observed a thorough detachment from temporal concerns and a gradual loss of the self into oneness with nature. The seventeenth century Japanese poet Matsuo Basho is largely responsible for the association of 17-syllable haiku verse with Zen Buddhism. In Basho's haiku,

critics find brilliant and succinct statements on the nature of Zen enlightenment “ Even the greatest of saints cherishes his child. Who, then, among the living creatures of this world could fail to love children claimed as one's own?”¹Further , it is said in the *Man'yōshū* that mention the name of Buddha Śākyamuni /an honorific title of Siddhartha Gautama, Buddhist temples , monks and nuns”²

The modern era has witnessed the advent of Buddhist thought in the West, particularly in North America. In the nineteenth century, the American Transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau absorbed certain aspects of Buddhism into their philosophy—Emerson's Over soul, for example, resembles somewhat the oneness that the Zen monk seeks to attain by eradicating the boundaries of the self and the other. The modernists also alighted upon certain aspects of Buddhism as part of their eclectic gathering of world myth and spiritualism. Analogies to the Buddhist quest for enlightenment have been observed by critics, for instance, in the poetry of W. B. Yeats and the writings of T. S. Eliot. A less intellectual concern with Buddhism at mid-century can be found in the work of the Beat poets, particularly Jack Kerouac and Allen

Ginsberg. Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958) has done much to popularize the religion and its precepts in the west. In the contemporary era, poets and novelists such as Gary Snyder and Peter Matthiessen have furthered the modern conception of Buddhism in literary form. Meanwhile the American poet and translator Lucien Stryk has helped to strengthen the ties between Eastern and Western Buddhism by translating the Zen writings of the twentieth-century Japanese poet Takahashi Shinkichi for English-speaking audiences.

.The topic of the interaction between Buddhism and modern poetry is a vast one, involving as it does several continents, and a huge variety of different approaches to writing. However, we can make a useful start by observing that it is in North America that the influence of Buddhism on literature has gone furthest and deepest. In fact it would not be going too far to say that the ‘Oriental Renaissance’ foreseen by the 19th Century Romantic thinker Friedrich Schlegel, as a result of the discovery of Eastern literature, is budding if not blossoming on North American soil.

Meanwhile, over here in Europe the promised Renaissance, if it has begun at all, is much less obvious. There are many reasons for this, but in many ways the turning point was the poet Ezra Pound’s translations of Chinese classical poems, which turned American literature towards the East from the time of the First World War onwards.

Much, much later, in the melting pot of nineteen-sixties New York, we find the likes of John Cage, and the

movement of Zen-influenced minimalism and Expressionism in which art becomes gesture, or silence – language as a non conceptual ‘happening’, image as pure marks on the paper – freed from all restraints of cultural reference. Between these two points a profound transformation of values took place, one which continues to this day.

In thinking about modern Buddhist poetry, the San Francisco Beats, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac naturally spring to mind. They have become, to their detriment perhaps, cultural icons; but they were and are hugely significant, the first modern poets who actually took up the practice of Buddhism and wrote out of that experience.

However, neither the Beats, nor the San Francisco Renaissance which took place around them, would have happened without the pioneering work of Ezra Pound. So to begin this survey I will look briefly at Pound and his influence on modern poetry in America, something it would be hard to underestimate.

Pound’s note on imagism in the Chicago magazine *Poetry* opened with a definition of an image as *that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time*. The image was to convey a world of meaning. The method favoured was that two or more juxtaposed images, with no direct connection, would catalyse an intuitive perceptual leap across the pause or boundary between them. The phrasing would be fresh, natural, apparently spontaneous, not too far from ordinary speech.

These notions shows strong traces of the poetics of the Tang dynasty poets such as Li Po, who if not necessarily Buddhist themselves were strongly influenced by a mixture of Taoist and Chan principles. In their work that intuitive leap, and the fresh, spontaneous phrasing by which it is communicated, are above all concerned with

a non-conceptual glimpse of the true nature of things – the ‘unborn’ of Buddhism or the Tao. This is also clearly a vital element in the aesthetics of the Zen Haiku form of Japan.

To what degree Pound (who favoured Confucianism) saw the full ramifications of what he had discovered is not entirely clear, but certainly some sense of this ‘glimpse of the essence’ comes through in his beautiful translations.

It is a little hard now, perhaps, to imagine how fresh and radical this approach seemed at the time, how it was able to blow away the stale cadences of late Romanticism and bring new life and energy to literature. We can get some idea by looking at one of Pound’s versions in *Cathay*:

Blue mountains to the North of the walls,

White river winding about them;

Here we must make separation

And go through a thousand miles of dead grass.

Mind like a floating wide cloud,

Sunset like the parting of old acquaintances.

The mood is not so different from Robert Burns, is it? The parting of old friends is a universal theme, but nothing in Romantic literature or before compares with that fresh, unimpeded movement from one simple, crystallised image to the next, nor the likening of the entire mind/heart to one unadorned, naked image – the floating cloud.

Imagism, despite the short life of the original movement, went on to influence deeply the course of

modernist poetry in America. Over in Europe Pound soon turned away from imagist purity towards the huge erudition of his *Cantos*, in which swathes of translation and complex imagery are spliced together in a grand anti-narrative. Here (as in Eliot's *Wasteland*) things Eastern jostle with many other influences and play their part in suggesting that all is not lost in the 'heap of broken images'.

*so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.*

This simple, bold poem is a useful symbol of the parting of the ways between European and American modernism. There are no garden implements, red or otherwise, in *The Wasteland*. Nor do we find in Eliot William's willingness to construct a poem out of plain, pithy, apparently non-poetic language, close to how an educated American would have spoken at that time. Think of William's famous poem in which he eats the plums in the fridge and writes a note for his wife to apologise – it is both completely ordinary and deeply poetic at the same time: 'forgive me, they were / so sweet and so cold.'

There is no doubt in denying the fact that this poem celebrating an absence which is charged with presence has a touch of Zen about it. Although Williams knew little of Buddhism he took Pound's example seriously, and something was carried across from the Tang Dynasty poets.

After the era of Williams and Pound there is then a strong line of influence in the USA to Louis Zukofsky and the Objectivist poets of the thirties. This then goes onwards to both the Beats in San Francisco and the poets associated with the famous Black Mountain college of the arts in the fifties, notably Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley and Charles Olson.

And here the story comes full circle in a sense, for both the Beats and the associated Black Mountain poets went back to the roots of the Imagist poetics and began to study the writings of Zen and Chan masters, as well as in some cases an eclectic mix of Western occultism.

Back in the thirties the more down-to-earth Zukofsky developed the Imagist lineage by putting emphasis on detail, image and thought, including political thought, combined with a vernacular diction: "Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody".

Although few have heard of him this side of the Atlantic, in America Zukofsky was tremendously influential on a whole generation of poets from the sixties and seventies, including John Cage, Denise Levertov and also the Language School.

So, it is clear from this survey, brief though it may have been, that without a vital impulse from the poetry of the far East, which was thoroughly steeped in Chan and Taoist notions of poetry as a Way, or path to spiritual freedom, modern poetry as we know it would not exist. As says some critics " **Buddhist modernism** (also referred to as **Protestant Buddhism**, **Modern Buddhism** and **modernist Buddhism**) consists of the "forms of Buddhism that have emerged out of an

engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity.”³

An intriguing line of enquiry is to ask why the far Eastern / Imagist strand was downplayed in the British Isles, while it did so well on American soil. A strong factor was certainly what W. H. Auden, Louis MacNiece and others were up to in the thirties. Like Zukofsky, they wished to bring in a kind of vernacular erudition which allowed for a full range of political concerns. However, in place of the emphasis in the ‘thing in itself’ we find an anxious, highly wrought formalism which disdained the free flowing and spontaneous.

Then in the fifties, in the trend usually known simply as The Movement, Philip Larkin and many others came to the fore. Drawing on the native English tradition of bleak but homely ruralism stemming from Thomas Hardy, they favoured a poetry of quotidian hopes and disillusion involving a sophisticated updating of traditional lyrical forms.

There are a number of lesser known but talented Buddhist poets currently at work in England, and a Buddhist anthology ‘The Heart as Origami’ was published recently. In Manchester Grevel Lindop is working on a long poem about the life of the Buddha. The Bristol poets David Keefe and Stephen Parr have been running Buddhist-inspired writing workshops for over ten years now, and Parr has written a modernist-style sequence ‘Tantris’, with strong Buddhist imagery, set in the ruined Docklands of East London.

Nevertheless, since the sixties American Buddhist poets have, thanks to the Beats, been blessed with much greater cultural credibility. There have been two major anthologies of American Buddhist poetry from the last three decades. Back in the eighties the anthology

Beneath a Single Moon was published by Shambala. Then a few years ago we had *The Wisdom Anthology of North American Buddhist Poetry*.

From these one gets a broad impression of Dharma poetry in North America: exuberant, often playful and spontaneous, experiential and colloquial. Its strengths are sincerity and abundant energy. To someone who loves English poetry, with its self deprecating wit and narrative lucidity, American Buddhist poetry may seem very loose, expressionistic and lacking in conceptual tension. However, there is certainly also some very fine, fresh writing being produced.

The rest of this talk, therefore, will consist of a brief look at three living American poets. Between them they illustrate what I see as the three main strands of Buddhist poetry since the fifties. These three are Jane Hirshfield, Robert Kelly and Diana Di Prima. They represent respectively what I call the reflective Zen strand, the Black-Mountain modernist strand, and the Beatific-Visionary strand.

Diana Di Prima was born in New York in 1934. She is known as the most prominent female poet who came to be associated with the original San Francisco Beats. In their milieu the ideas of Pound, Eastern poetics and Buddhist meditation were very much in the air, as well as, of course, copious quantities of drugs and alcohol. It wasn’t at all easy to be a woman on this wild and rough scene; in fact it wasn’t easy to be a poetic, sensitive male either.

It was out of this struggle to be alive and in tune with modern America, yet open to the spiritual, that Ginsberg’s Beat-epic *Howl* and Kerouac’s *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* were written. They are both exuberant modern prophecies which blend the myths of Mahayana Buddhism, with its golden Buddhas and

interlacing beams of light, with the poets' very modern concerns for a reformed, visionary America.

Kerouac was the more mystical of the two: in his work, golden Buddhas really do abound as he attempts to wrestle with his demons and combine his love of the Dharma with the Catholicism of his youth

The Buddhist modernist Robert Kelly also has occult influences in his work, but his writing is a world away from Di Prima's. Playful and formally inventive, he eschews self-mythologizing. Kelly was born in 1935 and educated in New York. Since 1982 he has been a student of Tibetan Buddhism under Kalu Rinpoche. He says that 'a poem is a nest of sounded deeds', which is a fine way of expressing the Buddhist concept of wise, selfless action in the field of literature (from his introduction in *The Wisdom Anthology*).

This articulation of a style was greatly assisted by the fact that a Buddhist tradition of nature poetry was available from the East. From the forties onwards Rexroth, Snyder and a few other pioneers had studied in some depth Chinese and Japanese originals. Snyder was never greatly concerned with formal techniques. From the Chinese masters, especially Han Shan, he took up the idea of being a wilderness poet, someone who sets down, with as much spontaneous sincerity as the moment demands, his experience of being a human being, Out There, away from the distractions of civilisation.

And Snyder, of course, often really did go off into the mountains to write and to practice Zen meditation. Furthermore, he has been able to influence and guide a whole generation of poets, Buddhists, or those very sympathetic to Zen and Taoism, who have written in similarly sparse and pared down styles – poets who have attempted to 'tell it as it is' when someone faces the elemental facts of existence in solitude.

Hirshfield. she has been a Buddhist for many years and has studied at the San Francisco Zen Center. Like Snyder, she has translated Japanese poetry. Her language is noted for its clean transparency but also for its ability to build up, out of very simple elements, a complex metaphysical probing. In this she is unique amongst the Zen poets of the West Coast. She has lived in the wilderness, but there is also a charming and rather mysterious domestic quality in much of her work. I choose these two stanzas more or less at random from her Selected Poems:

ROCK

What appears to be stubbornness,

refusal, or interruption,

is to it a simple privacy. It broods

its one thought like a quail her clutch of eggs.

Mosses and lichens

listen outside the locked door.

Stars turn the length of one winter, then the next.

There is a deceptive simplicity here. Hirshfield's work invites reflection and self-examination. An ethical quality shines through; a sense of balance, of possibilities and responsibilities. Hirshfield and Snyder represent the deepest and strongest current in American Buddhist letters. It is one that any objective account of American poetry in the last fifty years would have to include as a major force. They and their associates have articulated a genuinely inspired wilderness poetry, in which a Buddhist view of the fleeting, self-arising thusness of things is of paramount importance.

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