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## Zen Buddhism and American Poetry: The Case of Gary Snyder

**Zhao (family name) Dong (given name), PhD**

School of English and International Studies

Beijing Foreign Studies University

P O Box 100089, Beijing, China

Email: dzhao@bfsu.edu.cn

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#### Abstract

This paper examines the influence of the Buddhist philosophy and the Zen language ideology on Gary Snyder's poetry of nature. Snyder's poems reflect the basic Buddhist concepts of non-duality, impermanence, emptiness, codependent origination of all existence, and the inherent connection between mind and nature. Snyder's poetry is greatly indebted to Zen aesthetics in its conciseness, intuition and straightforwardness of spirit and expression. The Buddhist non-duality concept eradicates the Euro-American anthropocentrism and egotism through the plain, colloquial, intuitive, koan-like language. In sum, Snyder creates a new kind of American poetry with a Buddhist ethic and aesthetic, pointing toward a new direction in American poetry in particular and Western poetry in general.

**Key Words:** Gary Snyder, Buddhism, Zen, nature poetics.

#### 1 Zen and Language

Zen, as a form of Chinese Buddhism, seems to be always puzzling to modern philosophers and linguists in the Western world, who are unable to decipher the sense of Zen thinking and the Zen ideology of language. To find out the roots of this failure, we may note at least one aspect of the paradoxical facts of Zen. The doctrinal aspect of Zen asserts that no logical or intellectual doctrine is applicable in obtaining the ultimate truth known as Buddha-hood. It also holds that no word or speech is helpful in achieving the Sudden Enlightenment (*dunwu* in Chinese; *satori* in Japanese), the beginning of entering Buddha-hood. In a word, the Zen enlightenment is a primeval, "pure experience" of "things as they are" (*ruliao ziran* in Chinese), transcending the shaping power of

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language. Zen Buddhists believe that human language and thinking create illusion and cannot lead to enlightenment, the ultimate goal of Zen Buddhist practice (Park 2002; Wang 2003).

Erich Fromm's well-known essay, "Psychoanalysis and Zen Buddhism," presented at a conference in 1957 and then published in 1960, focused on the question of language, a more systematic analysis of language than D. T. Suzuki, forming the mainstream position for English-language works on Zen. Fromm established a sharp contrast between the mediating effect of language and "enlightenment" as an "immediate, intuitive grasp of reality" (1970: 94). According to Fromm, language functions in "conditioning" the mind, and this function is a negative one, since it "prevents awareness of reality" (1970: 98), whereas the goal of Zen aims to liberate the human mind (the source of all phenomena of the universe according to Buddhism) from linguistic and cultural conditioning. He used a series of metaphors in comparing language to a "filter," a "veil," a "screen," an "obstruction," a "distortion," a form of "alienation," "clothing" placed upon naked reality etc.. In a word, language is viewed as a block between the subject and object, leading to nothing but distortion.

Dale Wright (1998: 101) remarks, "The Zen master is one who no longer seeks solid ground, who realizes that all things and situations are supported, not by firm ground and solid self-nature, but rather by shifting and contingent relations... he no longer needs to hold his ground in dialogue, and therefore does not falter when all grounds give way... His role in dialogue is to reflect in a selfless way whatever is manifest or can become manifest in the moment." Thus, the essence of a Zen story or koan is its use of "live words" that serve as direct pointers, causing the practitioner to focus on a phrase, a word or a story to the effect that it opens out of the common-sense relations of the actual linguistic usage, and breaks the hold of language on the mind.

Therefore, there is a preference for silence in Zen Buddhism that favors silent meditation. Such a preference for silence is a direct reflection of the Zen Buddhist linguistic ideology, the cultural conceptions of "the nature, form and purpose of language, and of communicative behavior as an enactment of a collective order" (Gal and Woolard 1995:130). We can sum up the Zen Buddhist linguistic ideology as having two seemingly contradictory positions on the use of language (Park 2002). On the one hand, there is a distrust and denial of language and a yearning for silence. On the other hand, the non-logical, poetic uses of language (the focus of this paper), particularly *koan* (shortseemingly paradoxical and illogical statements, questions, or dialogues) are esteemed as the major requirement of Zen Buddhist training.

Zen Buddhist language ideologies are influenced by the practices and tenets of Buddhism. Buddhism had its origin in the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama who lived in the Six Century B.C. India. He saw through the sufferings in life, and, after six years of ascetic practices, eventually achieved enlightenment and Buddha-hood by sitting under the Bodhi-tree. His followers, the Buddhists do not believe in a creator god; instead, the Buddhist teaching encourages people to examine their inner nature, which is pure and eternal; once you discover this nature within you, you get enlightenment and therefore become the Buddha. As the Zen Buddhist tradition goes, when the Buddha was going to teach the essence of Zen to his disciples at the Vulture Peak Mountain, he held up a flower and revealed a smile on his face. When all the other disciples looked worried and

puzzled, unable to figure out the implied meaning, Mahākāśyapa nodded to the Buddha and smiled. Then the Buddha said to all, “I have a treasury of the eye of the true dharma, the wondrous mind of nirvana. I bequeath it to Mahākāśyapa. In the future, do not let its propagation be cut off.” The following short poem illustrates the essence of Zen:

Not found in words and letters.  
Pointing directly to human mind.  
Seeing into one's nature and attaining Buddha-hood.

This enlightenment involves “seeing through your own essential nature” and at the same time “seeing through the essential nature of the cosmos and of all things” (Scott and Doubleday 1992:2). In his *Platform Sutra*, the Sixth Patriarch Huineng talks about the nature of language by using thirty-six parallels:

[Things] arise and cease, and thus leave two extremes. When explaining any dharma, do not stay away from the nature and characteristics [of things]. If someone asks you about dharma, use language so that the two extremes are completely explored [and exhausted]. All explanation should be given using parallels to show that things originate from each other, and eventually the two extremes [dualism] will be exhausted [explored to its end], and find no place to set themselves up. (Huineng n.d., 343b)

From Huineng’s thirty-six sets of parallels, we know that to name things or to use words to define things is to classify them into different categories, which embodies the major function of language. By thus giving an independent identity to things, language begins to negate the core Buddhist concept of codependent origination (*yuanqi* in Chinese), which holds that nothing has an independent being of its own, that everything results from causes and conditions, and that all are but temporary combinations that have no real substance. In the earliest extent version of the *Platform Sutra* can be found suggestions in the Transmission Verses to the effect that the transmission takes place from mind to mind, not through words.

## 2 Zen in American Poetry

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed Chinese immigrants settling in Hawaii and California and bringing Mahayana Buddhist practices with them. The result was the building of numerous temples. At the end of the nineteenth century, Dharmapala from Sri Lanka and Soyen Shaku, a Japanese Zen master, attended the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which marked the beginning of Buddhist flowering in the United States. Their soul-cleansing speeches on Buddhism were warmly received by their audience and contributed to the rooting of both Theravada and Zen Buddhist traditions in America. Buddhism began to hugely influence the American society in the second half of the twentieth century. The Second World War, the Korean War, the flourishing materialism and the deteriorating morality combined to turn Americans’ interest in Buddhism. The American writers raised during the Great Depression and living through World War II were disillusioned with the postwar culture of conformity and materialism.

The Eastenculturation of the West which developed after the war provided American poets with a new path to rid themselves of the backdrop of Cold War anxieties, urban sprawl, and conservative

poetics. The literary and artistic groups in America were especially attracted to Buddhism for their artistic conception, plot, images and metaphors. Soon Buddhism gained a substantial following in America, and many Buddhist studies departments were established in the American universities. In the 1950's and 60's, many Westerners came to be interested in Zen Buddhism and Zen poetry anthologies came out in English translations.

Buddhism inspired the beats more deeply than any other religion, especially the Zen and Yogacara formulations of the Mahayana school. Buddhism attracted poets like Snyder and Kerouac because it seemed to make sense of the central facts of human experience, that is, suffering and impermanence, and to affirm the poets' intuition that life was dreamlike and illusory. American poets like them tried to draw inspirations from the classical texts of Mahayana Buddhism, such as the Lankavatâra, Heart Sutra, Vimalakîrti Sûtra, and The Gateless Gate, meanwhile incorporating Chinese *shi* and Japanese haiku poems. And more importantly, by tracing the origin of suffering in desire, or the idea of *ji* in the Buddhist Four Noble Truths, the Buddhist sutras seemed to offer a way out for the depressed and the artistic.

The connection between Zen Buddhism and the Beat generation in America was especially strong. Poetry writing, Zen, and Asian philosophy were all complementing each other in their vehement development. Famous Beat poets like Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg and Kenneth Rexroth shared a few crucial points of Buddhism, especially Zen and the Mahayana Yogacara school. They believed, among others, that life is characterized by suffering (*dukkha*) and impermanence (*anicca*); moreover, this world is ephemeral and illusory. Buddhist poetry denies exactitude and definitiveness and refuses conclusiveness, which is in accordance with Wallace's characterization of postlanguage: "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" (Lazer 2006: 10).

In the mid-1950s, the Beat Generation poets came to be greatly interested by Zen. Under the influence of Zen, the Beat writers' works are characterized by experimental styles and subjects, including spontaneous writing without regard for grammar, uninhibited discussion of personal experiences, and themes ranging from a rejection of American values and fear of nuclear war to sexual escapades and road trips. A special edition of the *Chicago Review* in 1958 included Snyder's essay "Spring Sesshin at Sokoku-ji," Alan Watts' "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," "Meditation in the Woods" by Jack Kerouac, and D.T. Suzuki's translation from the Chinese "Sayings of Rinzai." The grand new view of Buddhism with its horizonless space and all-encompassing awareness provided a powerful antidote to the restrictive views of the government, the literary establishment and organized religion.

### 3.0 Snyder and Buddhism

American poet, Zen Buddhist, deep ecology philosopher, and environmentalist, the last Beat, Gary Snyder, born May 8, 1930, is winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1975, and is regarded as an important spokesman for ecological activism. His style differs from the Beats for his profound

love for and commitment to nature, and his work is marked by his practice of Zen Buddhism. In 1952, Snyder went to study Oriental languages at Berkeley. He was already immersed in Zen Buddhism and had begun to write poetry about his work in the wilderness. He lived in Japan from 1956 to 1968, studying Zen Buddhism, forestry, and ecology. During his years in Japan, Snyder lived for some time in Zen monasteries, studied Rinzai Zen Buddhism, researched and translated Zen texts. He even traveled through Asia where he had an opportunity to meet with the Dalai Lama. After he returned to the United States, Snyder lived in the San Francisco wood area and continued his writing and lecturing. Snyder's poetry was rooted in the Native American myths and religious experience.

Under the influence of Buddhist masters like D. T. Suzuki, Snyder had done a great deal to popularize and propagate Buddhism in the West, both by publically explaining it, and by presenting a Buddhist perspective in his poetry. He read, studied and wrote about the *Upanishads*, *Vedas*, *Bhagavad-Gita*, and other Chinese and Indian Buddhist classics. He (1980: 94, 95) explains that "the convergence that I found really exciting was the Mahayana Buddhist wisdom-oriented line as it developed in China and assimilated the older Taoist tradition... Then I learned that this tradition is still alive and well in Japan. That convinced me that I should go and study in Japan." The Mahayana practitioners, believing that the Hinayana emphasis upon self wisdom and self enlightenment was insufficient, elevated the Bodhisattva path of compassion or the deliverance of all sentient beings out of suffering to the same level as wisdom. To reach this goal, Buddhist practitioners would postpone individual enlightenment until all can be freed of suffering. This universal sympathy was deeply planted in Snyder's psyche and his works.

To defend the western criticisms of Buddhism, Snyder (1980: 69) holds that "to act responsibly in the world doesn't mean that you always stand back and let things happen: you play an active part, which means making choices, running risks, and karmically dirtying your hands to some extent. That's what the Bodhisattva ideal is all about." For Snyder (1980: 16), what people need "is to take the great intellectual achievement of the Mahayana Buddhists and bring it back to a community style of life which is not necessarily monastic." For Snyder (1980: 153), Zen is "a way of using your mind and practicing your life and doing it with other people. It has a style that involves others. It brings a particular kind of focus and attention to work. It values work... At the same time it has no external law for doing it. So you must go very deep into yourself to find the foundation of it. In other words it turns you inward rather than giving you a rulebook to live by. Zen is practice that is concerned with *liberation*, not with giving people some easy certainty." Snyder (1980: 177) holds that "The poet is right there ... in the area that says 'Let the shit fly,' which is different from the religious person in civilized times, who is operating in the realm of control, self-discipline, purity, training, self-knowledge."

Buddhism allows Snyder to merge the western dualistic concepts of human mind and nature; for him, they are inter-connected and the one does not differ from the other. And it provides an alternative philosophical framework for those philosophers disillusioned with the West. His work, in his various roles, reflects an immersion in both Buddhist spirituality and nature. His first two books of poems, *Riprap* (1959) and *Myths and Texts* (1960), are based on his experiences as a logger and

ranger in the U.S. Pacific Northwest. *The Back Country* (1967) and *Regarding Wave* (1969) manifested his fusion of eastern religions, especially Zen Buddhism into everyday life. *Turtle Island* (1974), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize, and *Axe Handles* (1983) are most remarkable in revealing his interest in Zen. *Mountains and Rivers Without End* is one of his best expressions of the Zen views on nature and language.

Zen Buddhism inspires Snyder's interest in culture, the environment, and language. His work blends precise observations of nature with inner insight received primarily through his practice of Zen Buddhism. *Southwest Review* essayist Abraham Rothberg noted that the poet "celebrates nature, the simple, the animal, the sexual, the tribal, the self .... He sees man as an indissoluble part of the natural environment, flourishing when he accepts and adapts to that natural heritage, creating a hell on earth and within himself when he is separated from it by his intellect and its technological and societal creations." Snyder's involvement with Buddhism has been important to his poetry from the outset.<sup>2</sup> As Julian Gitzen (1973) noted in *Critical Quarterly*, Snyder "was attracted to Buddhism because its teachings conformed to and re-enforced his native personality, interests and beliefs". From his Buddhism-inspired reflections and his political critiques, Gary Snyder's work resonates with the implications of a life lived within nature.

Regarding Buddhism, Snyder (1995) writes in *A Place In Space*, "The marks of Buddhist teaching are impermanence, no-self, the inevitability of suffering and connectedness, emptiness, the vastness of mind, and a way to realization." The Buddhist and Zen ideology of language helps Snyder to solve his intellectual dilemma of using language, the medium of rational discourse, to convey deeper, extra-rational states of being. Many of Snyder's poems resonate with echoes of his Buddhist training, his application of Buddhist ideas to the conceptualization of the human relationship with nature, and perhaps one most telling example of this tradition can be detected in "Ripples on the Surface," the final poem in *No Nature*. This poem explores how the human mind knows nature, seeks to read it as a text, and apprehends it as if it were a "performance." He concludes by erasing the distinction between nature and human culture, and stating "No nature / Both together, one big empty house." This is none other than the Buddhist ideal of non-duality, whereby the subject, the logical self, the rationalizing language merge with the external world and the object. Snyder's poetic identification of the mind with things, as we read in the poem "Riprap" and others, is a direct reflection of Hua-yen Buddhism. According to this branch of Buddhism, the interconnectedness of nature is "the jeweled net of Indra" and is mirrored in ecological images. Hua-yen Buddhism, especially Avatamsaka and "the jeweled net," has a prominent place in Snyder's ecological consciousness (Martin 1987: 99).

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<sup>2</sup>In *American Poetry since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives*, Alan Williamson wrote that Snyder's canon "suggests a process of meditation or 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 the infinite and eternal, All and Nothingness."



### 3.1 Snyder's Ecology

According to Snyder's Buddhist ecological mindset, the biosphere is a living organism, all connected, all dependent on the parts. In this worldview, the ecological consciousness leads to a re-definition of the American ideals of humanism and democracy. Buddhism, to Snyder, 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. The personal realization of this from-the-beginning state cannot be had for and by one—"self" — because it is not fully realized unless one has given the self up; and away" ("Buddhist Anarchism")<sup>3</sup>. Wai-lim Yip (1986) argues that, for Snyder, the underlying principle is the complete awareness of all beings in nature as "self-so-complete" or *ziran*, as the Taoists and the Ch'an Buddhists would say. In Snyder's poetry is also found another prevalent theme of Buddhist ecological truism, that is, the phenomenal world is not the essence of reality and essential Truth cannot be perceived or articulated. This idea directly echoes the *Diamond Sutra*, the sacred text in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, dating back to ninth-century China, which explores the fundamental notion of reality and the importance of non-attachment. The *Diamond Sutra* leads to the later Platform Sutra by the Sixth Zen Patriarch Hui Neng whose keen proposition is the non-reliance on language in transmitting the Dharma.

When viewing nature, Snyder draws on his Buddhist sources. To him,

"an ecosystem is a kind of mandala in which there are multiple relations that are all powerful and instructive. Each figure in the mandala—a little mouse or bird (or little god or demon figure)—has an important position and a role to play. Although an ecosystem can be described as hierarchical in terms of energy flow, from the standpoint of the whole all of its members are equal...Asian thought-systems (although not ideal) serve the natural world a little better. Chinese Daoism, the Sanatana ("eternal") Dharma of India, and the Buddhadharma of much of the rest of Asia all see humanity as part of nature. All living creatures are equal actors in the diving drama of Awakening." ("Ecology, Place & the Awakening of Compassion")<sup>4</sup>.

Thus informed by East-West poetics, land and wilderness issues, compassionate Buddhism, and long years of familiarity with the bush and high mountain places, Snyder's Buddhist-oriented eco-philosophy and poetics exhibit the essential and life-sustaining relationship between place and mind.

At the Ethno Poetics Conference in 1975, Snyder (1995:47) stressed,

We live in a universe, "one turn" in which, it is widely felt, all is one and at the same time all is many. The extra rooster and I were subject and object until one evening we became one. As the discriminating, self-centered awareness of civilized man has increasingly improved his

<sup>3</sup><<http://www.bopsecrets.org/CF/garysnyder.htm>>

<sup>4</sup><<http://www.ecobuddhism.org/solutions/wde/snyder/>>

material survival potential, it has correspondingly moved him farther and farther from a spontaneous feeling of being part of natural world. It often takes, ironically, an analytic and rational presentation of man's interdependence with other life forms from the biological sciences to move modern people toward questioning their own role as major planetary exploiter.

He goes on to say that the "self-centered awareness of civilized man has increased, improving his material survival potential, it has correspondingly moved him farther from a spontaneous feeling of being part of nature world." In this way, he denounces the western human-centered subjectivity and reinforces his attack against the anthropo-centered civilization by quoting the Hua-yen Buddhist saying, "all is one and the same time all is many," understood as the nature of existence in Hua-yen Buddhist literature.

Thus we may as well say that though Snyder is recognized for his many contributions to American literature, he is best remembered for his contribution to ecological literature. His ecological poetry anthologies includes: *Riprap* (1959); *Myths & Texts*, (1960); *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (1965); *Mountains and Rivers Without End* (1965); *The Back Country* (1967); *Earth House Hold* (1969); *Regarding Wave* (1969); *Six Sections from Mountains and Rivers Without End Plus One* (1970); *Turtle Island* (1974); *He Who Hunted Birds in His Father's Village: The Dimensions of a Haida Myth* (1979); *Axe Handles* (1983); *Left out in the Rain* (1986); and *No Nature* (1992). In the essay collection *The Practice of the Wild* (1990), Gary Snyder contributed distinctive ideas to our understanding of ecological inquiry. With his lifetime of nature experience and wilderness dwelling, Snyder offered the "etiquette of freedom" and "practice of the wild" as total solutions for the global crisis today.

In 1969, Snyder established a farm on the San Juan Ridge in the foothills of the northern Sierra Nevada Mountains, where he co-founded the deep ecology movement, along with Dolores LaChapelle, Bill Devall, George Sessions, Arne Naess, Alan Drengson, Michael Zimmerman and Robert Aitken. He established there a lay Zen center and ecology center. In the Mahayana Buddhist vein, deep ecology takes ecology to a much loftier realm. Ordinary ecology sees only the utilitarian value in the environment, making nature serve man's needs, but deep ecology gives intrinsic value to all sentient beings and life forms. To Snyder (2007: 31), men have nature, to the extent that it includes human culture. For Snyder, "'ecology' is a valuable shorthand term for complexity in motion."

### 3.2 A Look Into Some Exemplary Poems

Snyder's poems stress the Buddhist idea of the oneness of man and nature. This can be well illustrated in "By Frazier Creek Falls" (*Turtle Island*), which depicts a harmonious picture of nature: 'under a 'clear sky', the creek 'falls into a far valley', the 'strong wind' in the pines, whose trunk bodies are 'straight, still'. Then, the reader is told to 'listen'. The wind in the trees, the trickle of the creek reveal: 'This living flowing land / is all there is, forever' – this is a Zen way of seeing the world: hills, rivers and trees flow into each other, there are no clear boundaries – 'We are it / it sings through us -- / We could live on this Earth without clothes or tools!' Neither are there clear



boundaries between us, human beings, and 'nature': the land 'sings through us', the boundaries are blurred to the point where we 'are it'. This can be linked to both ecology and Buddhism, which play the major roles in Snyder's oeuvre.<sup>5</sup>

The well-known "Pine Tree Tops" can be regarded as Snyder's representative Zen poem, the poem that best demonstrates the charm of Zen in nature poetry:

In the blue night  
frost haze, the sky glows  
with the moon  
pine tree tops  
bend snow-blue, fade  
into sky, frost, starlight.  
The creak of boots.  
Rabbit tracks, deer tracks,  
what do we know.

The first five lines of the poem depict the scenery, drawing a simple yet profound picture of Zen flavor: the moon, the tree top, the sky and the snow are bathed by the starlight, with no traces of human interference; the human is part of the scene, or the human is the scene. According to Zen Buddhism, the moon symbolizes the Buddha nature; the fresh and cool scene the ideal atmosphere for achieving nirvana. The active creaking of boots and the static footprints of deer and rabbits blend perfectly, which is the essence of the Zen aesthetic.

"Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" (*Riprap*), demonstrates the poet's pondering of the relationship between nature and self. The poem is composed upon Snyder's experience as a fire-watcher at Sourdough mountain in Washington State. This harmonious and nondualistic relationship is even manifested by the poem's structure. The first part of the poem depicts the landscape and the second the 'Self' which is an integral part of that same landscape scene, merging the perceived boundaries between land and self:

Down valley a smoke haze  
Three days heat, after five days rain  
Pitch glows on the fir-cones  
Across rocks and meadows  
Swarms of new flies.

I cannot remember things I once read  
A few friends, but they are in cities.  
Drinking cold snow-water from a tin cup

<sup>5</sup> Noah Niehaus, "To Love the Earth: The ecological vision in Gary Snyder's Ecopoetry," <<http://www.fr-online.de/kultur/literatur/sprache-ohne-schlamm/-/1472266/4454068/-/index.html>>, retrieved on 13 August, 2013.

Looking down for miles

Through high still air

The poem achieves the desired result of writing after mediation. According to Buddhism, in the deep aspect of meditation, the human microcosm will be united with the Brahma, the Macrocosm and all distinctions and discriminations would disappear and dissolve. Both its form and its images serve to exemplify this point.

The poem “Wave” focuses on the wave-like energy (or the cosmic breath, *qi* in Chinese) that flows through and permeates all things and humans. This is a concept enforced in Mahayana Buddhism. Rather, “one of the objects of Buddhist meditation is to achieve awareness of impermanence in all aspects of reality, external and internal” (Almon 1997: 83). The other poems from Snyder’s anthology *Regarding Wave*, from which “Wave” is extracted, “frequently offer the world placed under the microscope” (Almon 1997: 81). This again echoes Snyder’s Zen Buddhist influence, as “The mind serves properly as a window glass rather than as a reflector. The mind should give an immediate view instead of an interpretation of the world” (Alan Watts’ famous statement about the mind). This idea is clearly seen at the beginning of “Wave,”

Grooving clam shell,  
streak through marble,  
sweeping down ponderosa pine bark-scale  
rip-cut tree grain—sand dunes, lava—flow.

(Snyder 2351)

This all permeating cosmic energy confers a life-giving source to nature, which connects nature to human beings. In this view, men and nature are but one, and there need not be any distinction between the “I” and the objective world, between this and that, here and there, high and low, etc.. In this way, Snyder promotes the Buddhist ideal of universal unity that leads us to discern the relationship between people themselves and their surrounding environment.

#### 4 Conclusion

Snyder’s simple, direct nature of poetry writing was inspired by his studies of Zen Buddhism (the koans in particular), as well as by his study and translation of the Monk Han-shan (a hermit saint in China’s Tang Dynasty)’s poems, or *hanshanshi* (Cold Mountain poems), its definitive nature being monosyllabic. Snyder provides a new scheme for writing poetry and writing about life, for in his poems is found a paradigm of how man is reunited with nature, and if I could say, how man is nature. A clear mind sees only the ever-present moment. Buddhist concepts like no-thingness and impermanence provide a totally novel element to Snyder’s poetic depictions of nature, as “A clear, attentive mind / Has no meaning but that / Which sees is truly seen” (Snyder, “Piute Creek”).

The simplicity of Snyder’s poetry is indebted to the profound influence of Zen Buddhism on his sensibility and thought. In sum, his poetic career is informed intellectually by the Buddhist thought and practice, and literarily by the tradition of Han Shan. To him, words are incapable of capturing the innermost part of human nature, for that part comes before language, signification, tradition and culture. Snyder’s poetry does concern the ecological consequences of progress and civilization. In sum, Snyder creates a new kind of American poetry with a Buddhist ethic and aesthetic, pointing toward a new direction in American poetry in particular and Western poetry at large.

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