

Sometimes we find that it is our own country that perpetuates the suffering. (And we may think here of the Greek tragedians, Sophocles and Euripides, whose tragedies criticized the continual wars fought by the Athenians. These ancient tragedies draw poignant and sympathetic portrayals of the victims of war: the women, children, and the slaves. Cf: *Troides, Iphigenia at Aulis* et al). Sometimes we learn that it is a member of the class or community that has suffered a rape, abuse or whose friend or family member is serving in the Iraq War. (We think here of Homer's *Iliad*, for example, and its illustration of the ruthlessness of war). These discoveries are difficult to endure. However, the awareness of the suffering and the injustices is for our students in contemplative education, a call to compassionate, engaged action.

Some people may think that contemplative education is passive—that teachers simply create a safe container for a person's true inner self to emerge, some idealized peaceful "inner self," and to use an expression from somewhere, these students can then "follow their bliss." Instead, I like to think of education in the terms used by Ajahn Sumedho, an American who has been a monk in the Theravada tradition for forty years. "The goal of contemplative practice," he says, "is not to follow one's heart, but to train one's heart." It is the same for contemplative education. As all teachers know, education is a transformative experience (Cf Cicero, "*sed pleni sunt omnes libri, plenae sapientium voces, plena exemplorum vetustas: quae iacerent in tenebris omnia, nisi litterarum lumen accederet*" *Pro Archia*).

To conclude: I urge my students to build confidence, courage and strength through their developing ability to be aware of what is—not some idealized state of mind or utopian world view—and I urge them to resist the pressure to think reductively, simplistically, selfishly, that is, to see themselves as excluded or powerless in the face of the world's problems. Instead, I urge them to unpack the complexities of whatever issues they are confronting to better understand the historical and cultural contexts of those issues so that they can respond with an awakening heart and mind. I suggest then, and only somewhat facetiously, that contemplative education at Naropa, with its roots in both the Greek classical tradition and Indian Buddhism, might be called "applied Asian Studies."

A Path To Intimacy With Demons: Contemplative Education at Naropa University

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The question of how contemplative practice fits in with the arts in general, and poetry in particular, has been by turns coolly ignored or hotly contested at Naropa. For many years the MFA in Writing and Poetics at The Jack Kerouac School was the university's only program that re-

quired no contemplative study for a degree. This provoked some irritable growls out of other departments, but little articulate debate—not surprising given that to speak about either Buddhism or poetry is a challenging task. Neither is well understood, or should I say readily understood.

From its earliest days Buddhism was ambivalent about literature—specifically the composing of poems. Like Buddhist practice, good poetry demands arduous, concentrated, long-term engagement along unconventional lines. The evidence suggests that true proficiency or accomplishment in poetry as in Buddhism is so distinct, so individual, and so unpredictable, that only a few people achieve mastery. Moreover, their accomplishments veer into unmapped terrain. This makes proficiency appear unique, if not downright eccentric.

In 1987 the Zen teacher Norman Fischer—himself a prolific experimental poet—convened a gathering of poets who practice some form of Buddhism at Green Gulch Zen Center on the flanks of Mt. Tamalpais, just north of San Francisco. This was surely the first time poets had gathered in the west to discuss what role meditation played in their art. For me the most memorable statement came in Norman's opening comments. He said, "When you sit down and do nothing, that's meditation. When you sit down and do something, that's poetry."

Curiously, when I quoted this back to him some years later a vague look overtook him and he replied that he doubted he'd said such a thing. So another uncrackable little kernel of words enters Zen lore, pithy and anonymous. But if there were not present-day uncertainty concerning what these two activities mean, poetry and contemplative practice, something would be amiss. I think not only of early injunctions in Indian Buddhism against musical instruments and discursive speech. In T'ang Dynasty China Po Chu-i could write:

Since earnestly studying the Buddhist
doctrine of emptiness,
I've learned to still all the common
states of mind.

Only the devil of poetry I have yet
to conquer—

let me come on a bit of scenery and

I start my idle droning. (Burton Watson, trans.)

In Japan, the forthright Ikkyu (1394-1481), a riveting poet as well as a Zen abbot, declared poetry "originally a work out of hell." "We must sigh," he added, "for those taking this path / to intimacy with demons."

Tongue in cheek those statements may have been, but I think beneath their playfulness stirs an uneasy heart. Here is a story told by the American poet Gary Snyder. In 1956 Gary went to Kyoto. He had received the first scholarship from The First Zen Institute of America, founded by Ms. Ruth Fuller Sasaki to send Americans to Japan to study Zen. Gary arrived at the Shokoku-ji temple.

...I found myself in Japan, at the age of twenty-six, in a Zen temple with Oda Roshi, and in one of our early conversations I timorously asked him, "You know, sometimes I write poetry. Is that alright?"

And he kind of laughed and said, “It’s alright as long as it truly comes out of your true self.” And he said, “You know, poets have to play a lot. Asobi.” ...That really flustered me, because the word asobi has an implication of wandering the bars and pleasure quarters, the behavior of a decadent wastrel. I knew he didn’t mean that. So for about seven years while doing Zen practice around Kyoto I virtually quit writing poetry. But it didn’t bother me. Maybe my first exercise was not being bothered by it. My thought was, Zen is serious, poetry is not serious. In any case, you have to be completely serious when you do Zen practice. So I was completely serious, and I didn’t write many poems.

At the end of that period, just before Oda Roshi died, I had a talk with him in his hospital, and I said to him, “Roshi! So it’s, Zen is serious, and poetry is not serious?” And he said, “No, no—poetry is serious! Zen is not serious.” I had it all wrong!

(Jimmy & Lucy’s House of “K” #9, 1989)

Perhaps it is this play (“poets have to play a lot”) that keeps the Jack Kerouac School in the public eye. Sam Kashner’s recent book *When I Was Cool*, which has received a great deal of attention in venues like the New York Times and on NPR, is only the latest in a series of efforts to “cash in” on Naropa’s Beat legacy. With a kind of arrested fascination America can watch its poetry rebels misbehave on the grounds of a Buddhist college.

Misbehave, or play? Or is it that they are testing the edges of received social practice? This kind of around-the-edges activity has, since the advent of civilization in the West, been one job of the poet. Catullus, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Baudelaire, Gertrude Stein, Allen Ginsberg—we might see these as landmark figures playing the edge since Rome was founded.

In 1483, the Japanese monk and litterateur Ten’in Ryutaku wrote, “Outside of poetry there is no Zen; outside of Zen there is no poetry.” In my curriculum I regularly use translations of Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), the renowned haiku and haibun poet of Japan, who made Ten’in’s words concrete two centuries later. After 2000 years of a kind of wary relationship between Dharma and poetry in Asia, it was at the time of Basho and largely due to his influence that poetry came into its own as a Way. Other disciplines associated with Zen Buddhism were already regarded as ways in their own right, training grounds for satori: calligraphy, painting, archery, flower arrangement, and the tea ceremony.

Basho took poetry, connected it to the Taoist notion of “perfect inutility,” and explicitly made of it a Way not just to make poetry but to refine one’s character, free oneself of delusion, and learn about one’s actual world. “A fireplace in summer, a fan in winter,” he termed it. Perfectly useless.

At what points in my own curriculum do Dharma

and poetry meet? First I want to note a crucial discovery of twentieth century Modernist and postmodern writers: that poetry is an open engagement with the blank page, and thus a “score” or precise record of the mobile mind. Its subject matter is no more restricted than that of the mind, and might envelop anything accessible to human nature. Politics, economics, erotica, cooking, natural history, technology, as well as the planet’s heritage of art and religious lore. Its task is to test the edges of received language: not working within the confines of already invented forms, passed on by others, but each poem a unique exploration of the dimensions of the poet’s heart. “A graph of the mind moving,” as Philip Whalen put it.

Naropa includes in its Mission Statement the cultivation of “present moment awareness,” and this would certainly be one of the things I’m speaking about. One writes not of ideas already formulated, but of the forms of thought as they emerge, with all the slip-ups, hang ups, gaps in understanding, and candor. There is of course an anxiety inherent in this.

Anyone who pays much attention to writing knows something of the existential presence of the blank page. To a child-like sensibility this white presence is a yearning delight, crying out for inscription. To the well-civilized adult—when does this come about, with puberty? with a college degree?—it can be a terror, an embodiment of ancient Chaos. Even a rebuke to one’s own mental uptightness.

Certain Asian traditions, led by the classic books of Taoist thought, see an inscrutable gateway (a Mother) that gives birth to forms, to the 10,000 critters of Chinese philosophy. In Buddhism this is *sunyata*, an emptiness the Heart Sutra declares identical to all things. To any but the bravest, *sunyata* has a terrible, fearsome, intimidating beauty.

For a writer, the restless, disquieting, anguished, cold roiling in the belly at the sight of the blank page—the place where the teeming forms issue from the mysterious gateway—is a familiar condition. How important to make peace with this state, though we know it puts us on Ikkyu’s “path to intimacy with demons.”

But what are demons? Are they not a kind of concretized projection of human anxiety? I suspect most of this anxiety (and most of the demons) come from the nearly incomprehensible fecundity, food-chain complexity, and erotic surge of the natural, embodied world. All around us creatures are copulating, gestating, hatching, dropping, spawning, in rapturous, polymorphous ways. Creatures are preying and being preyed upon. They die, decay, ferment, get eaten alive. To study this world is surely to enter Ikkyu’s path to intimacy with demons.

So a final point of contact particularly dear to my own practice is what I would term nature literacy or an ecological consciousness. One refreshing quality of most Asian poetry traditions (themselves aligned with Buddhist, Taoist, Shinto, or Hindu sensibilities) is the way non-human residents of the natural world become citizens of standing in the poem. Elsewhere I’ve written about India’s traditions, in which poetry collections serve as almanacs or chronicles of

the revolving year, and a poem can be critiqued on the accuracy of its botanical detail. In Japan the same impulse is evident in the organization of haiku and renga collections. The detailed specifics of natural history contain all the mysteries that animate, fascinate, or terrify, the human heart. Poems carry important lore about our place in the ecological web.

In Western poetry traditions, over many centuries the natural world became so much a list of metaphors that the actual non-human world practically vanished. Think of the rose in English poetry. It is the human heart, it is the female genitalia, it is velvet and voluptuously crimson, yet hides the thorn of love or the worm of lust. “Oh Rose thou art sick / the invisible worm that flies in the night,” and so forth. Where is the palpable rose? Gertrude Stein wrote “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose,” and claimed that with that final rose, for the first time in 400 years “the rose bloomed in English poetry.”

I want to return to haiku for a moment. If haiku is, as I believe, a state of alert ecological consciousness expressed in a rigorously fashioned, brief poem, it is a consciousness that highlights at least one precise element of the

local bioregion. Here is Basho:

A crow has settled
on a bare branch—
autumn evening.

One of my own:

Dusk.
The wolf survey’s coming
Express Mail.

Poetry serves as a reminder of habitat. Like an almanac or calendar, it conveys distinct information about one’s place in the larger environment. This brings a modern practice of poetry into alignment with the first recognizable human inscriptions, which are probably the calendrical bones found on the tundra of Siberia. Alexander Marshak was the first to suggest that those hand-incised artifacts were pocket almanacs, used to determine when the salmon were running or the caribou migrating. Imagine: you give a circumspect glance at the heavens, take a strong whiff of what’s up on earth, then let your human heart swing into action. How much wiser can poetry get?



Tom Coburn, Nona Olivia, Andrew Schelling, Lee Worley and Peter Grossenbacher at the 2004 ASIANetwork Conference in Lisle, IL.
Photo provided by Jim Leavell.