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<td>Citation</td>
<td>北海道教育大学紀要 人文科学・社会科学編, 61(1): 25-37</td>
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<td>Issue Date</td>
<td>2010-08</td>
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北海道教育大学
Anti-capitalist Ideas of Emptiness and Compassion: Gary Snyder and Buddhism

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ゲーリー・スナイダーと仏教
—資本主義への対抗原理としての空と憐れみの思想—

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to clarify an American Beat poet Gary Snyder’s understanding of the essentially Buddhist ideas of emptiness and compassion. I examine Snyder’s poems and essays to understand how these ideas have been received in the United States since the 1950s. In the poem “February,” a realization of the interrelatedness of all things dawns on the narrator when he is going about his daily monotonous chores. Completely engrossed in the tasks at hand, the narrator reaches an empty state of mind. In this poem, the narrator carries out monotonous chores with ritualistic sophistication. The empty state of mind that he achieves allows him to find his own embeddedness in an environment. Compassion toward others is then derived from this empty state of mind. When people understand the unity between themselves and other beings, they are able to sympathize and identify with them. I will clarify this issue by examining Snyder’s epic poem *Mountains and Rivers Without End*. I will also examine his essay on the 9/11 attack in order to demonstrate the relevance of his Buddhist ideas at present. I propose that in this essay, Snyder promotes Buddhist non-violence as a means of resistance against the currently dominant cultural atmosphere, which has an anthropocentric nature. By examining his consistent treatment of emptiness and compassion, this paper attempts to understand how at one time (the 1950s–1960s period), anti-anthropocentric literature was enthusiastically accepted in the United States, but later, it was regarded as somewhat insignificant.

1. The Idea of Emptiness: A Realization of Interrelatedness

The aim of this paper is to elucidate the essentially Buddhist ideas of emptiness and compassion and explore the transition of their acceptability from the 1950s to the present through the works of Gary Snyder, an American Beat poet.
In the 1950s and 1960s, Beat writers tried to incorporate Buddhist ideas, which were applicable in and shed light on the Western cultural context, into their poems and writings, intending to make essential changes in their lifestyles and views of life.1 I would argue that the Buddhist worldview and their idea of emptiness, in particular, helped writers like Snyder reexamine the binary opposition of subjectivity and objectivity that was rooted in the Western understanding of the world.2 Jack Kerouac’s Dharma Bums portrays this cultural atmosphere through its main character, Ray Smith, who enthusiastically tries to tell his family that “Everything is empty but awake! Things are empty in time and space and mind” (121–22). The idea of emptiness was believed to help dethrone people from the supremacy of an imagined hierarchy of things in which human beings are “higher than pigs, walk proudly down country roads” (Big Sky Mind 35). By emptying ourselves, we will see this anthropocentric view of the world as just a “mind movie,” an illusion (35).

In order to look at the Buddhist ideas of emptiness and compassion as embodied and metamorphosed in the cultural context of the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, Gary Snyder’s essays and poems will be examined in the following discussion. My hypothesis is that the ideas of emptiness and compassion had subversive value in the 1950s and 1960s, so that believing in these ideas was a powerfully political posture. In contrast, in the current social and political context, we tend to see these ideas as detached and impotent. I will examine the latter opinion in the paper’s fifth section, through an essay that Snyder wrote as a response to the terrorist attack on 9/11. Though Snyder has been consistent in his beliefs and philosophies, the social signification of Buddhist thoughts in his writings has changed according to the cultural contexts of different eras. By examining Snyder’s treatment of emptiness and compassion, we will see how the anti-anthropocentric discourse provided in literature was accepted at one time and was regarded as insignificant at another time.

Emptying oneself means entering into a state of mind in which we spontaneously exit from the self-centered self. This is an opportunity to reconsider modern life, in which we exploit nature for our own sake. Technology, understood as a tool with which we exploit nature in its instrumentality, will be questioned when we come to see the interrelatedness of all beings and outer nature with the realization of emptiness. The idea of emptiness urges us to reconsider technology, and helps us obtain a truer vision of the world in which there is no self and there are therefore no objects.3 Regarding this concept, I will examine two of Snyder’s other essays in order to show the relationship between the concept of emptiness and technology.

Snyder’s “February” represents this process of emptying oneself with the Zen idea of “samu (作務),” which means an attention to the immediate tasks at hand in daily work.4 With a concentrated engagement in repetitive daily handiwork, the conscious state of mind diminishes in the perceived unity with things. By attempting to sustain order among things by hand, we will be able to find our right place in the network of things, in which we are actually already enclosed. In this poem, we see that compassion toward other beings is naturally derived from this realization of our embeddedness, which the narrator attains through daily handiwork. I will talk about this in Section 3.

Section 4 provides a closer focus on the relationship between emptiness and compassion.
with a reference to the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, who cites a German theologian, Meister Eckhart. In the last section, to conclude my argument, I will examine Snyder’s recent essay which promotes non-violence as a response to the 9/11 attack. In the poem, the catastrophic event is seen with Buddhist compassionate eyes that see the continuance of all things after their deaths.

2. Westernized Buddhist Ethics in the 1950s: A Way to Decentralize Us

Gary Snyder was a leading figure of the Beat generation, which radically opposed the American social system in the 1950s and 1960s. The American cultural atmosphere during the 20-year period after the Second World War was defined as “cold war paranoia” in which “the distrust of the Asian Others” was in the air (Gray 21). In response to this “paranoia,” writers and artists of the San Francisco Renaissance, including the Beat writers, tried to exemplify inter-cultural citizenship through their artistic creations.

From 1947 until 1951, Snyder studied at Reed College, working toward an interdisciplinary major in literature and anthropology. Since the course of study at Reed somewhat frustrated Snyder, during his subsequent graduate study at Berkeley, he joined the Beat movement in San Francisco; later, in 1956, he decided to go to Japan to study Zen. He took part in Zen practices first at Shokokuji and later at Daitokuji, both in Kyoto. With occasional trips to other Asian countries and to his home state of California, he stayed in Japan until 1968. He continued writing letters and essays about Japan and its culture to his fellow Beats and for the general public. These writings confirmed that Eastern philosophy was best represented by Buddhism (especially Zen) as a vital means to raise doubts and objections against a dominant tendency in contemporary society. With the help of the information provided by Snyder, those who read his works were able to form sounder judgments of Buddhism. His sincere attempt to assimilate into the East and occasional correspondences from remote places made him a mythological figure that embodied Eastern thinking through actual practices.

It is often pointed out that the dualism and anthropocentrism rooted in the Judeo-Christian Western civilization generated various social problems that we are facing even now. The idea that human beings are entitled by God to change the world, exerting our superiority over other beings, encourages us to develop new technological devices by which we dissociate ourselves from the traditional — therefore predictably stable and environmentally friendly — way of living. As Shrader-Frechette asserted, if “our crises of pollution and resource depletion reflect profound difficulties with some of the most basic principles in our accepted system of values,” we are necessarily urged to examine our inner selves in order “to discover a new framework for describing what it means to behave ethically or to be a moral person.” For young Americans in the 1950s and 1960s, Buddhism might have provided an anti-anthropocentric principle with which they intended to prevent the human beings from heading toward catastrophe. They adopted the meditative method of Zen Buddhism in order to decentralize human subjectivity and to reconstruct the traditional framework through which the world was seen. Kerouac’s Dharma Bums accurately depicts the cultural atmosphere in the U. S. in the late 1950s. In Buddhism, human beings are regarded as a part of the world.
as one of the equal members of the community of all animate and inanimate things. A group of young Beat poets, including Snyder, were attracted to Buddhism as long as it could be employed as a means to negate Western civilization’s infinite desire to modify the world according to people’s pursuit of maximum comfort.

Danger on Peaks (2004) retrospectively shows how Snyder has used Buddhist motifs such as emptiness and compassion in his writing. In its first section, “Mount St. Helens,” his mountain trekking experiences from age thirteen to the present are reviewed both in poetic and prosaic styles. It is noted in “The Climb,” which is included in this section, that when he climbs a mountain, Snyder feels that he is very small, amounting to almost nothing in the overwhelming presence of nature; this reminds him of Issa’s “Inch by inch / little snail / creep up Mt. Fuji” (7). Finally, this snail walk brought him to the top of the mountain. The sight from the smooth and broad St. Helen’s summit filled him with awe. Snyder wrote:

…but snow peaks are always far higher than the highest airplanes ever get. I made my petition to the shapely mountain, “Please help this life.” When I tried to look over and down to the world below — there was nothing there. (8)

This realization of nothingness occurs when a person’s subjectivity is revealed as something that penetrates into, or is penetrated by, nature. When confronted with the overwhelming scale of nature, Snyder knew that his life was almost nothing and his destiny was completely in nature’s hands. Also, with the great view spread before his eyes, everything he could see down below, along with the man who sees that view, seem to be nothing. With the “petition” to the mountain, he saw below him nothingness, which is a parallel to the Buddhist emptiness that represents the shared ground of self and others. All things are nothing and are therefore equal in front of nature. Technology deprives us of the essential sense of unity between us and nature, but it can be regained when we are in nature.

“Atomic Dawn” dramatizes the moment in which Snyder’s lifelong resolution to fight against technology was made, on the August 14, 1945—the day after he first climbed Mount St. Helens and his heart became “still one with the snowpeak mountain” (9). On the bulletin board at a mountain lodge, he saw newspapers that reported the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the first and the second atomic bombs:

Horrified, blaming scientists and politicians and the governments of the world, I swore a vow to myself, something like, “By the purity and the beauty and permanence of Mt. St. Helens, I will fight against this cruel destructive power and those who would seek to use it, for all my life.” (9)

Atomic bombs are a common symbol of the uncontrollable modern technology that makes our life threateningly inhuman and unnatural. With hope that the tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would not be repeated, Snyder swore to himself that he would fight against this extreme atrocity against human beings and modern civilization.

I would like to point out that Snyder realized (1) that his chief opponent was technology and human beings’ inclination to use it for egocentric purposes, and (2) that what he should fight for was nature and our integration in it. Mountain climbing is associated with these attitudes be-
cause it brings us to a state of mind that can be referred to as the Buddhist concept of emptiness, as a metaphor for the interpenetration between a subject and the objective world.

3. Empty Mind at Work: Realizing the Inter-relation?

Besides mountain climbing, as seen in the previous section, a devotion to the immediate work at hand lets us discover an empty state of mind in Snyder’s texts. Snyder often suggests that a continual engagement in handiwork helps us to have an affinity with the earth or an environment. In one interview, he mentions the triple alienation that happens when we avoid engaging in handiwork: “[F]irst, you’re trying to get outside energy sources/resources to do it for you; second, you no longer know what your own body can do, where your food or water come from; third, you lose the capacity to discover the unity of mind and body via your work” (The Real Works (hereafter TRW) 103). Here, Snyder points out that we tend to take no notice of our unity with the world; however, through handiwork, we rediscover the interrelatedness of ourselves and the world “outside,” along with the unity of mind and body.

Through Buddhist practices at Japanese Zen Buddhist monasteries, Snyder learned how to discipline himself by maintaining a balance between him and other things via work. For the first few years at Daitokuji in Kyoto, he was frustrated when he was asked to do daily chores such as sweeping the garden, helping out with firewood, and heating up the bath, because he had to follow established procedures taught by senior monks and masters.13 For monks at a Japanese temple, adhering to the fixed procedure of doing chores is important. This is so not because the fixed procedures were historically proven to be efficient, but because the stylized procedure for each piece of work is established to function well in the system of all chores within a regular day format. When Snyder proposed an idea to do one chore more efficiently, a senior monk responded: “We don’t want to do things any better or any faster—If we speed up the work in the garden, you’ll just have to spend that much more time sitting in the zendo, and your legs will hurt more” (TRW 109). An attempt to maximize the efficiency of accomplishing one chore may destroy the balance that must be kept among all necessary chores done in one day. The truthfulness of this monk’s remark may also be applied to a societal or communal plane of human relations; that is, if we highly prioritize the infinite desire to pursue conveniences and comforts and use our ingenuity and technology to change our circumstances, the right balance between us and others—and also between us and the natural environment—will be severely flawed.

All things are related to each other. This insight of interrelatedness encapsulates the very essence of the state of mind that one reaches through handiwork. In Zen practices, an absorption in simple physical labors, called “samu,” meaning a concentration on an immediate task at hand, leads a practitioner to empty-mindedness. “Samu” leads one to discard the will to dominate objects, and then to gain insight into interrelatedness. In “February,” the narrator’s bodily movements produce constant rhythms through cleaning the house and maintaining his motorbike, and these rhythms invite readers to sense the texture of the actions as if we were feeling them together with the narrator. Readers are asked to put themselves in the narrator’s mind in order to sense the unity of mind and body through the
work that the narrator is experiencing.

water taps running, the sun part out

sweeping floor

knocking cobwebs off the shoji, p-p-p-pap

wiping the wood and the mats with a wet rag

hands and knees on the veranda

cat-prints—make them a footwiper

of newspaper

wash the motorcycle, fold clothes

start a new fire under the kama.

fill Mrs. Hosaka’s kerosene stove tank,

get the cat hairs

out of the kotatsu.

take the sheets in from the bamboo poles

where they’re drying

put away the poles

stand them up below the eaves and

tie them with strings. (The Back Country 55)

As is evident, the poem represents the state of mind that one experiences through the completion of repetitive chores at home. Complete devotion to the simple immediate tasks at hand banishes diverging thoughts from the mind, so that one becomes able to feel the interface of the bodily extension and the objects around one. The rhythm of domestic physical labor brings the narrator to the calmness of mind in which the mind ceases to refer to itself and sees its place in an interrelationship with other things. This state of mind, called an empty state of mind, is often thought to be attained by meditation in the formal training of Zen practice, which involves sitting for hours on end, looking deeply inside of oneself. However, this poem’s uniqueness lies in its emphasis on attaining an emptiness of mind amidst repetitive house chores; this can represent the “samu” aspect of Zen practice, which is done in the garden outside a zendo (practice hall). This complete engagement in an immediate task situates a person in a concrete relationship with objects, while in meditation one temporarily dissociates oneself from actual circumstances in order to reach an empty state of mind.

The lines of the poem, as shown, have irregular indentation, as though imitating the flow of water that runs among valleys and mountains. Life in 1950s Kyoto was still premodern, so the narrator had to start “a new fire under the kama” because at the time, environment-friendly fuels were used for heating or cooking. Thus, basic daily chores involved patient repetitions of simple tasks, making life more down-to-earth and creating an affinity toward nature. The visual effect of the poem suits this motif of affinity with nature because it imitates the natural flow of matter and energy with words. The arrangement of words is also a representation of the down-to-earth life in which a close tie to others, including both animate and inanimate objects, is keenly felt. As we will see in the following passage, an egalitarian view of life on earth—all the different animals are persons—casually appears in the narrator’s mind when he is engaged in daily chores. The poem then concludes with an image of charcoal glowing red in the dark, leaving behind the “pure white” ash:

Nansen mews angrily because he feels so sick

to all the different animals are persons

what will I do about Liberation.

6:30 bath

charcoal, black, the fire part red

the ash pure white (55)

Advanced technologies help us to complete necessary tasks more easily; however, they may
close the circuit of the mind and the outer world by doing the work for us, dissociating us from direct contact with things. In contrast, the realization that all animals are equal dawned on the narrator when he was so absorbed in his work that he ceased to think of himself. The energy flow of the sun, which pierces all beings, is also recognized in this poem, as it begins with the sun imparting its energy to beings on the earth and ends with the pure white ash in where the suns' parted energy had been used to heat water.

With the simple lifestyle described in “February,” which needs little help from modern technology, our lives can become environmentally friendly; such a lifestyle asks us to engage in repetitive physical work in order to maintain an order in, and give discipline to, our lives. This poem may imply, when we read it in the present time, that the use of technology should be regulated lest it go far beyond our intuitive understanding. Technology is not necessarily bad; for example, in this poem, the maintenance of a motorbike is equated with more primitive daily chores, such as sweeping the floor, drying laundry, taking care of a sick cat, and so on. Motorbike maintenance is not regarded as something unnatural as long as we do it with our hands and with emotional involvement. Wherever repetitive maintenance is needed, a stable relationship among things will be established, in which a human being is incorporated as merely a part of the whole. We cannot stop doing a task like erasing the footprints of men on the genkan (“sweep out the genkan footprints” (55)), once we begin completing it as a daily obligation, as long as we want those places to be kept without footprints. When the narrator is completely absorbed in the “immediate tasks at hand” that we see in this poem, he loses his egocentric state of mind. The realization that all animals are created equal then occurs to him. I would call this state of mind compassion, whose basis lies in a sympathetic understanding of other beings; that sense of compassion can be best perceived through an empty state of consciousness.

To conclude, the equality of all beings is grasped within a serious attentiveness to handiwork that is done in a fixed way, like a ritual that has been practiced for centuries. Compassion toward other beings will arise based on an awareness of the emptiness attained through work. Regarding this sequential occurrence, Snyder wrote in The Mountains and Rivers Without End (hereafter MRWE): “O, ah! The awareness of emptiness brings forth a heart of compassion!” (149). We will examine this poem in detail in the next section.

4. “A chaotic universe where everything is in place”

Snyder envisioned the germ of MRWE on April 8, 1956 when he visited Japanese artist Saburo Hasegawa. He was ceremonially served a powdered Japanese green tea and was told about the Japanese Zen monk painter Sesshu (MRWE 154-55). It took 40 years for Snyder to complete this epic poem, which can be compared to an ancient Chinese landscape painting done on a scroll that extends infinitely leftward. Since, theoretically, extra scrolls can always be added, the painting can encapsulate the continuous movement of time and space, without coercing an artificial framework (like the scenography of Western paintings), to create the reality of a natural landscape.

MRWE is an attempt to understand the duration of time and the extension of space in the natural world in one poem, in which even artifi-
cially built structures, such as cities and cultural artifacts, are incorporated. Selby (2005) insists that Snyder “privileges the gaze of a superior spectator” who can see, with a bird’s eye view, the changes of seasons or the flow of time that are spread on a scroll paper, as on a screen. The problem is, he says, that this privileged subject guarantees a transcendent perspective from which the infinity of nature is surveyed. According to Selby, this may become a sophisticated variant of anthropocentrism. On the other hand, Martin (2005) cites Dogen’s *Mountains and Waters Sutra* to assert that the last poem in *MRWE* depicts the disappearance of self in a direct experience (85). Martin’s analysis is related to my argument regarding the disappearance of self in physical tasks, as examined in the previous section. In the following discussion, I will shed a different light on the controversy between these two scholars by examining the emptiness motif in *MRWE*.

In a poem entitled “Finding the Space in the Heart,” the narrator describes visits to “silvery flats that curved over the edge,” to which he first came in the 1960s (149). He has returned there several times during the subsequent decades. Later in this poem, the narrator describes a visit in the 1980s; standing with the view of the wild flat in front of him, he reaches an enlightening vision of nothingness in which time itself emerges from inside. He felt “time being there” (151) somewhere between him and the wild:

> all equal, far reaches, no bounds.  
> Sound swallowed away,  
> no waters, no mountains, no  
> bush no grass and  
> because no grass  
> no shade but your shadow.  
> No flatness because no not-flatness.

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In Snyder’s poetic imagination, mountains and rivers are metaphors for the two principles based on which the world is established: according to his remarks, mountains are “the tough spirit of willed self-discipline” and rivers “the generous loving spirit of concern for all beings” (155). In short, they represent two different principles that compose this world. It may seem that with this metaphor Snyder retains a world view based on the binary oppositional understanding of the world that is often seen in sophisticated Western thought. However, on this occasion, when the narrator has an enlightening vision, there are “no waters, no mountains” (151) in the wild flat, and the viewer’s mind is submerged in a non-difference that paradoxically comprises all things. Only the “wind-whip breeze” sharply cuts through this empty place, uniting the objects in the place by piercing through them like the pulsation of a body. “We meet heart to heart” (151) there when compassion toward others spontaneously comes from the unity of all things in the scene.

The total abandonment of self-interested viewpoints toward the world is discussed by some philosophers when they talk about religion. In
such arguments it is often pointed out that a rejection of the recognition of things as shapes and images is the key for the abandonment of self, because recognizing things as shapes is supposed to be an outcome of the analytical function of intelligence. A realization of nothingness occurs when a person liberates oneself from the world, discarding the shell that separates him or her from the world; when this liberation occurs, things and the self altogether lose their outlines, so that they show their essential interrelatedness, their oneness. Nishitani Keiji, a philosopher of the so-called Kyoto School, examines Meister Eckhart’s idea of the “breakthrough” of Spirits, comparing it with the Zen idea of nothingness. Eckhart understands God as absolute nothingness; this idea was called unorthodox by the Christian Church because it radically de-thrones God as the supreme entity that gives cause for all things. Eckhart’s philosophy is regarded as negative theology, and it shares several ideas with Eastern thought. Nishitani traces Eckhart’s argument about “breakthrough,” in which both a human being as a spirit and God present themselves as nothing, letting each other into themselves so that the absolute oneness underlying them consequently appears. A person invites God to break into herself/himself so that God breaks her/his outer “forms.” However, this should mean that the person simultaneously breaks the superficial forms that s/he lends to God as His appearance. Thus, both the self and God, in their formal appearances, are simultaneously negated, losing their visible forms, thereby reaching back to their absolute nothingness (Kami to Zettaimu 27-8). The above quote from MR WE seems to dramatize a scheme similar to Nishitani’s summary of Eckhart’s “breakthrough” because it describes a transformation of all forms into no form, which is something that Eckhart and Zen Buddhism proposes. I would like to point out that this understanding of nothingness shared by Western and Eastern religious philosophers like Eckhart and Nishitani, respectively, epitomizes the Zen idea of compassionate disintegration of self in the world and has clearly influenced Snyder’s poetic imagination.

5. Active Non-violence Against Terror: Compassion to the Immortal

So far, I have claimed that the Buddhist idea of nothingness was employed by Snyder in order to propose a radical objection to the anthropocentric Western thought that is based on an understanding of the world according to subject/object distinctions. This Western world view has often been criticized by contemporary ecologists, whose standpoints Snyder mostly shares, as a source of the destructive exploitation of nature in the modern era. In the first section, I examined Snyder’s declaration that the human inclination to use technology in a destructive way was what he thought he should be fighting against. Modern technology is the materialization of a will to pursue the maximum comfort in life, and Judeo-Christian anthropocentrism is often blamed since it permits us to exploit nature for our benefits. Snyder in his early years seems to have found Eastern thought, best represented by Buddhism, as a vital instrument to negate the premises of Western civilization. As I explained in the preceding chapters, the Buddhist idea of emptiness is at the very heart of an attempted disintegration of subjectivity.

Is Eastern philosophy as significant in the twenty-first century as it was to the counterculture of the 1950s and 1960s? Now I have returned to the question that I posed in the introduction. At present, Buddhist thoughts seem to
be incorporated in ecological discourses that function as a modern version of counterculture, rebelling against the capitalist economy. However, in the current cultural context, the Buddhist manner of social commitment does not often seem politically active. These cultural contexts may create differences between Snyder’s treatment of Buddhist ideas and their acceptance by the reading public from the 1950s onwards. To clarify this, let us examine another piece from Snyder’s most recent publication, *Danger on Peaks* (2004). “After Bamiyan” is a work of prose that provides some thoughts and episodes on the bombing of Buddha statues in Bamiyan and also on 9/11, with a few poems inserted in it.

The attack of September 11, 2001 frightened a majority of people in Western countries, who were told that after the collapse of the communist countries that successively occurred around 1991, the capitalist social system would prevail all over the world. However, after 9/11 they started to believe that after the so-called Pax Americana of the 1990s, we once again entered a politically and culturally unstable period, as Slavoy Žižek pointed out with sarcasm (Žižek 34-5). Proposing non-violence, which is a typical Buddhist posture, might seem a weak political gesture when the world is facing the turmoil of retaliation for violence, but nevertheless this is what Snyder suggests in “After Bamiyan.” Snyder wrote this poetical prose when he was inspired—or rather, enraged—by an insincere comment made by his acquaintance, who said that Western intellectuals’ criticism of the Taliban’s destruction of Afghan Buddha statues was too sentimental (102). We need “no divine sanction and priesthood” anymore; rather, those pre-modern remnants are obstacles in the age of reason and technology, this man said (102). He continued: so why do we feel sad if the Buddha statues, meaningless idols, were blown away by fundamentalist Islamists? Neither those who destroyed nor that which was destroyed are worth being paid attention. Snyder furiously pointed out that this complete lack of respect for the artworks of other cultures, which is often seen as a typical, rationalized (though usually not overtly expressed) attitude that Western civilization assumes, is likely to trigger a destructive abuse of power. Violent use of power will be carried out, sometimes unconsciously, by the side of those who believe in the supremacy of their culture, against other cultures that do not share the premises of the former. “I doubt you would have the nerve to call for launching a little missile at the Ka’aba. There are people who would put a hit on you and you know it,” writes Snyder to this person (102), as if it were already well predicted that Western civilization’s indifferent arrogance and unconscious belligerence toward other cultures would invite the catastrophic event, which actually occurred soon after. It was immediately after this mailed correspondence that we witnessed the 9/11 attack, about which Snyder wrote:

September 2001

The men and women who
died at the World Trade Center
together with the
Buddhas of Bamiyan,
Take Refuge in the dust.
(*Danger on Peaks* 102)

The resolution not to retaliate against those who aim to exert violence upon you and the Buddhist compassion for all things that are empty and therefore equal (in this poem, the equation of the dead at the WTC and the destroyed Buddhas of
Bamiyan) are united in a quiet but indomitable posture. This posture helps us to stay calm and avoid the vicious circle of retaliation that is incessantly reproduced between globalizing capitalist doctrines and those that dare to give life against these doctrines.

In the above quote, Snyder makes a difficult proposal for non-violence, framing this quiet message within the Buddhist principles of impermanence and reincarnation: all of the victims finally "take refuge in the dust" for rebirth (102). The attitude that Snyder takes in this poem may remind some of us that the Dalai Lama continued to claim Tibet’s autonomy within China, not independence from it, when the world saw the Tibetan unrest in 2008 and Western supporters demonstrated for the protection of human rights. Non-violence activists were sometimes ridiculed because they seemed impotent and inefficient when attempting to bring about a quick solution to an urgent political issue (Deats 6); but only through an "inner demilitarization," if we use the Dalai Lama’s phrase, can we make an attempt not to let what we do not want to happen "now here" to happen anywhere else.18 Understanding the interrelatedness of things—which, as we have seen, is brought about by realizing emptiness as the shared ground of worldly things—helps us to take a stand against what is floating in the air of the political unconsciousness: something that makes us forget that we have compassion, and also something that drives us to pursue materialistic values without end.

Gary Snyder’s poetic visions, which link themselves with Buddhist ideas, were sometimes welcomed, and sometimes regarded as too detached by the public, but they retained the consistent qualities that I have examined in this paper. The idea of emptiness accurately summarizes Snyder’s attitude toward the inhabitants of the world as inseparably interrelated; with compassionate understanding of the things around us, we discover the unity of all things, among which we are only a part of the whole.

Notes

1 The influence of Buddhism on 17 Beat writers is discussed in Big Sky Mind. Although it only focuses on poets and excludes novelists, Beneath a Single Moon is more comprehensive in the number of poets that it deals with. Moreover, Field’s account is thorough in its description of the public acceptance of Zen in the twentieth century in the United States.

2 Daisetz Suzuki made a great contribution to the spread of Zen Buddhism among American intellectuals, attempting "to use Western psychological terms to explain Zen Buddhism" (Halper, ed. 205).

3 I would like to cite Martin Heidegger’s argument about technology here. The nature of technology does not lie in our desire to exploit natural resources for utilitarian purposes, according to Heidegger. Rather, man is called upon to make use of nature, responding to the possibilities that lie in nature. Nature urges itself to be stored in a form of stocked energy. Heidegger calls this state "Reality" and "[i]t he irony is that in the process objectivity dissolves completely" (Smith 8). Strangely, this "Reality" in Heidegger’s sense is similar to the emptiness that I discuss in this paper.

4 In the introductory note to “The Berkeley Barb Interview,” Lampe gave this English translation of this Zen Buddhist idea (The Real Work 7).

5 His favorite faculty member then was Lloyd Reynolds, a calligrapher and an enthusiastic amateur Orientalist. It is worth noting that his grades in literature “averaged a bit lower than those in anthropology,” possibly because the “curriculum was then based on the assumption that...it was produced mainly by white males in Europe and the United States,” says French (Halper 16). The reason that he was not very successful in college may be that his academic interests were well beyond the cultural boundaries.

6 In Daitokuji, he participated in the project of translating a Zen scripture into English. Under the guidance of Ruth Fuller Sasaki, the research group was orga-
nized to prepare an English translation of Lin-chi Lu (Rinzairohe). See Yampolsky (Halper, ed. 60-69).

7 He also published two essays in which he wrote about his first months in Japan: “Letter from Kyoto” in a 1957 issue of the Evergreen Review, and “Spring Sessin at Shokoku-ji” in a 1958 issue of the Chicago Review. The latter was reprinted in Earth House Hold.

8 Added to this, millions read Kerouac’s Dharma Bums (1959), whose heroically hip Buddhist, Japhy Ryder, supposedly modeled on Snyder, became a symbolic fi-

9 Kalland reviewed several studies that show how the Judeo-Christian world view is seen to be a cause of today’s worldwide ecological crisis. (145-46)

10 Cited in Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel (75)

11 A table that enumerates distinctive traits of Eastern and Western religions is a useful quick guide to see basic comparisons between Buddhism and Judaism/Christianity. (Monk et al. 1987:49. Reprinted in Sponsel & Natadecha-Sponsel 79)

12 Nathan Mao touches on two of Snyder’s poems that he thinks describe a moment of Satori, an enlighten-

13 Consult Fields (208-24) regarding Snyder’s experi-

14 Watson provides a good report about life in Kyoto in the ‘50s in Dimensions of a Life (53-59).

15 MRWE (153)

16 Related to this, for example, Snyder says, “Science, technology, and the economic uses of nature need not be antithetical to celebration” (“Blue Mountains Constantly Walking” in The Practice of the Wild 113). In this context, “celebration” means a ritual by which hu-

17 In an earlier poem, Snyder said, “I am a child of the

god of the mountains” (Myths and Texts 23). According to Snyder’s remark as stated above, mountains represent “willed discipline” and are rather masculine in nature. The poem was finished in early 1956 when he was about to leave for Japan to study Zen, whose practices seem to emphasize a masculine will to discipline the self as well.

18 The Dalai Lama says, “I often mention inner disarmament and external disarmament, meaning inner demilitarization. Whenever we confront some problems, then we should not think how to counter them by violence, but through dialogue and finding some mutually acceptable solutions. That is the ethos of non-violence. We need inner disarmament, less hatred, less ill feeling and respect for the other side and their interest.” (Dagmar “An Interview with Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama,” 116)

REFERENCES


Martin, Julia. “Seeing a Corner of the Sky in Gary Snyder’s Mountains and Rivers Without End.” Western

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