



Gary Snyder, His Deep Ecology and Zen Emptiness

Abstract:

Gary Snyder (born 1930-) is acclaimed as a deep ecology thinker, Zen believer, sane ecological poet, and eco-social activist. His Zen practice in Japan spanning over ten years (1956-1967) has enabled him to envision the deep connections of life with this planet earth. It can be claimed that in every part of the world he lives and breathes, he finds the Zen value through and through. He would celebrate the play and delight at the heart of the world, which would contradict the materialistic view of structuralism and deconstructive philosophy as well. To Snyder, every object and phenomenon is in its constant practice. It is the practice that helps realize the Way, the Path to the meaning of Emptiness, which is the absolute Zen meaning of being.

He believes that the planet earth is a living, renewing, self- recuperating phenomenon, which would speak for his deep ecology principles. He would declare that nature is not a book, but a performance.

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Authors:

Dr. Sarangadhar Baral¹, Nikita Suman², Malsawma³, Sourav Upadhyaya⁴

¹Professor, Department of English & Culture Studies, Mizoram University Aizawl.

(^{2, 3, & 4}) Research Scholars, Department of English & Culture Studies, Mizoram University

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I. Introduction: Planetary Mind

Snyder's early encounter with nature and interest in Zen led him to Japan to practice the tradition and principle of Zen. For over ten years, he underwent rigorous practice, study and training. His creative poetry reveals the deep connectedness of life with this planet earth. It can be claimed that in every part of the world that man lives and breathes, he finds the Zen value through and through.

Aware of the deep reality, he does not ignore the surface reality, since these are the one reality ultimately, which pronounces the principle of Emptiness. To continue with this idea of recurrent on-goings, one may look in "The Mountain Spirit":

Walking on walking

under foot earth turns

Streams and mountains never stay the

same. (MRWE, 1990, p. 9)

The inevitable process of change, the turning of earth without clinging to a changeless, immutable certainty or center, re-emphasizing the inessentiality of the world or life is being meditated upon here. No doubt, this poetic sense has all the Zen insight into the material world, especially the mountain walking. Poststructuralism also denies the logocentrism or essentiality of the structure, and reinforces 'structurality' of plays and alternatives in playful freedom (Derrida 279-280). But Zen does not objectify socio-material effects as the root cause of primary freedom and human equality.

What is significant to hold is that the earth is a living process and in constant practice. In practice is the Path, as Zen Buddhism teaches, not in its end product for human uses alone.

Snyder has given a fresh twist to old Chinese thought of “mountains and rivers are constantly walking.” The old Chinese saying enforces that states and kingdoms are bound to fall, while mountains and rivers stay. But a contemporary twist given to the old vision means the opposite, since mountains and rivers are being constantly bombed, mined, bridged and polluted, whereas modern political states and governments continue to prosper. This socially compatible view in the contemporary times is not removed from the essential Zen mind that means no trail remains constant, that the earth turns, and apparent stabilities break down. In other words, ‘walking upon walking,’ crossing of currents, or ever-renewing earth does prove the principle of *Emptiness* by unintended, even unexpected, outcomes contrary to mathematical certainties.

Snyder envisions the planet earth as a living, renewing, self- recuperating phenomenon. Several ideas are working in tandem here: A planet-specific idea, i.e., limited to earth as an isolated human spectacle is contested and denied; secondly, this planet as life’s dancing place is one among millions but swirling in a vast cosmic network; thirdly, this planet is uniquely located within a grand compassionate web or net; and fourthly, every aspect of the planet is throbbing with a principle of flux, subtle fluidity, significantly hence empty of prefixed stabilities, of logocentric absolutism. Even above the idea of diversity, therefore, the poet’s planetary mind rises to the level of cosmic consciousness and that, of course, through an intimate awareness of a living, playful nature’s order, order that is *wild*, other than humanly assumed. Subtle streaks of science and spirituality shine and twine in his words cited above.

‘Planetarism’ may be thought of as an intertextuality of forces and systems that sustains life both inwardly and outwardly. The reader gets awakened to the poet’s deep conviction in this regard as the following wisdom shines in brevity:

*This living flowing land
is all there is, forever*

*We are it
it sings through us –*

(“By Frazier Creek Falls”, *TI*)

Like Zen Buddhists, Taoists, and Native Americans, Snyder too believes that this earth is not only fluid and alive (opposed to scientific ideas of death and motionlessness), but it is also the only world available to human life as well as to all other living ‘beings.’ Then, he knows that this living and vibrating land, moving at a different pace, is not different from us; its sanity and sacredness vibrate through us: “it sings through us”. It is well said that spirituality begins where science stops. Today’s science, for instance, quantum mechanics has come to an uncertain halt at the quantum face of deep reality.

Love and identification with a physical geography take cognition of the concerns that arise from the increasingly snapped relationship between man and nature in the face of threats to our healthy life. If Snyder solicits inspiration from his early American Leopold’s environmental (some claim as ‘biocentric’) ethic, it is to a greater good, the good of the whole planet more than a biotic community on land. This is why Snyder chides his forefathers for their indulgent killing of animals and felling of trees. It is unbearable for him to see the log-trucks carrying trees away to a death land:

The log trucks remind us,

As we think, dream and play

Of the world that is carried away.

(‘Little Songs for Gaia’, *AH*)

As already observed, the poet severely reprimands those who plunder and pollute the habitats on the planet, who dream of “special cities in the sky.”

II. Critiquing Cultural Ecology

It is pertinent in this context to position Snyder vis-a-vis the social Darwinists. Darwinists and cultural evolutionists in the 1870s’ Europe espoused a belief in biological evolution of races and developed inferiority/superiority paradigms, and their zealots’ insidious campaigns had led to arrogate much of an aggressive, racist knowledge of humanity what Darwin’s real biological evidence would never envision. Briefly, social Darwinism is used to be a politically arrogant and anti-planetary propaganda to essentially denigrate organic societies as savage and with self-attributed high morale to subjugate and exploit people and nonhumans in such ecosystems. Bookchin reformulates the Marxist critique of nature and has argued the concept of nature from the perspective of social ecology. Social ecology is “a holistic vision” that relates species to species, species to an ecosystem and to the planetary cosmos as a whole, and re-emphasizes the dialectical process as fundamental to realizing “the primordial continuum, the eternal one-becoming-many, the ground of being” (Clark 7, 9). Bookchin takes a good step away from the conservative Marxist agenda, purportedly human and social. He would have social ecology and natural ecology integrate holistically. He considers the ego of consumerist society as underdeveloped, and suggests its replacement with a richly-developed selfhood with the right kind of consciousness and sensibility to form a social ecology. In his view, there exists a remarkable compatibility between a process-oriented, dialectical outlook and an ecological one (14). The idea of ‘wholeness’ has no truck with a spectral “oneness” yielding “cosmic dissolution into a structureless nirvana” (23) which he contradicts in referring to E. A. Gutkind’s enforcement. Bookchin insists on the evolutionary force, historical process, and logical intelligence of science to proclaim that “the history of a phenomenon is the phenomenon itself,” and that “very little is lost in the evolution of life-forms including “our very bodies” (23). This latter point has been questionable in light of Zen and other Asiatic religious standards. While presenting a historiography of man’s developing relation with nature, he has advocated a rational ecological society “free of the theological and mystical proclivities” (11). The title of his book *Ecology of Freedom* is meant to “express the reconciliation of nature and human society in a new ecological sensibility and a new ecological society – a reharmonization of nature and humanity through a reharmonization of human with human.” He premises his radical utopianism (opposed to futurism) on humanity’s imaginative and creative freedom free from “hierarchical” coercion to produce (humans as) “deities” or ‘supernatural entities’ “within nature and not above nature” (11). Snyder’s Zen conscience however would normally counter some dimensions of Bookchin’s social ecology for its human-centric material aggrandizement.

Snyder has a firm belief, on the other hand, on building organic relations with nature in order that man would realize his Buddha-nature in an interconnected world. His idea of Zen freedom is truly liberatory, whereas Bookchin’s ideal freedom, essentially a processed derivation from the Marxist idea of justice and freedom, is sealed within socially driven practices. Snyder’s conviction in nature as real and living “performance” speaks of a different awareness of nature, which is more of a spiritual sensibility than a technologically driven solution with superior human continuity. From this perspective, much is lost to humanity, even if this loss of spiritual connectedness is little or no loss to all historical materialists and social ecologists like Bookchin. There is no idea of spiritual liberation

within any dialectically Marxist material culture, that is a binary structure, anyway. Snyder has condemned both communism and capitalism equally of ecological crimes that are being an obvious part of this discussion here.

Cultural materialists and dialectical historicists have argued that nature without culture is a delusion. Contrarily, Timothy Morton observes, “Living beings all exchange substances with their environment(s)” (150). He contends that a nature versus culture attitude is dualistic in theory, because “there is no such ‘thing’ as the (isolated) environment, since, being involved in it already, we are not separate from it” (151). Morton advances the view in *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) that deep ecology is an attempt to aestheticize nature. His ecological criticism is informed by Benjamin’s critical position how nature, evolved as a reified object, is not being natural in art, and which needs ‘de-distancing’ and ‘de-aestheticization’ (162-163). On the whole, nature has been a cultural production for man’s continuous existence, and there is no age for such a thing as nature or wilderness in isolated freedom from culture. Snyder’s Zen belief is in sharp contrast to this cultural production of nature. Looking seriously at severe devastations, it could be said in nature’s defense that man needs nature for his own identity, whereas nature has no need for man to know itself. Broadly, nature in its expansive wholeness and diversity surpasses man as a little dot.

It is also relevant and pertinent to remember how science visualizes this possibility of our planetary harmony. In his book *Consilience*, Wilson analyses and greatly hopes that “[o]ur species, the supposed *summum bonum* of Creation” can do more than “all the animals combined” with supports from instruments of science (52). It is because human cultures and genes together shape our consciousness, and cannot be outright separated or abandoned to isolated states (Wilson 117). Whether social or scientific, most of the social ecologists would not understand the spiritual nuance as critical to their new acknowledgement of man’s proper location within nature and not above the nature. They have willingly allowed man a somewhat special status in the dialectically planned social ecology and are deeply suspicious of deep ecology which in real honest terms puts man too within nature and not above it. Snyder is widely respected as a laureate of deep ecology. Deep ecology is deeply spiritual in action and thought, and endorses as humble as animal-like relationship, but with a higher consciousness such as Zen Buddhists, Taoists, the Tantra faithfuls and Amerindians cultivate in relating to the earth.

Arne Naess’s deep ecology hypothesis has developed “two ultimate norms or intuitions which are themselves not derivable from other principles or intuitions,” as Devall and Sessions consider (66). Obviously, these are not supported by “the methodology of modern science based on its usual mechanistic assumptions and its very narrow definition of data.” What the authors argue is that these intuitions are “arrived at by the deep questioning process and reveal the importance of moving to the philosophical and religious level of wisdom” (66). Well, any layman from the Eastern philosophical and Dharmic background does not ordinarily see his scriptures, culture and customs teach other than a deep, interactive dynamism between human and planetary realms. At the same time, the immediate sense of the contemporary devastations of nature does not exonerate Easterners of committing grievous misdeeds either. We are all complicit in civilizational marauds against nature. However, the authors’ perspective of deep questioning has a pertinent relevance to a Western-centric history of dualist thought and indoctrinated dominance over all nonhuman realms. It is of course not to disagree with Naess’s deep norms of “self-realization and biocentric equality” which inspire a transformed vision (66) of the world that Snyder’s practice already celebrates. Nevertheless, these transformations, to contend, are ‘derivable’ and to an extent, obviously derived from the Eastern sources like deep Zen, Taoist, and Tantra principles.

III. Eco-Humanism and Compassion

Deep ecologists no doubt have a space for scientific intelligence which matters, but they are not enthusiasts for a scientism to map and mine all of the wild earth to a fixed structure, or to limit life spirit, life dynamism, and life play in a planned design. The deep ecologist wishes the planetary connectedness live and thrive in its state of bliss and bounty. To recall “The Answer” by Thomas Jefferson whose inconvenient Christianity (inhumanism / atheism) seems to be spiritually imbibed by Snyder: “The whole remains beautiful.” (qtd in Devall and Sessions 63). Jefferson maintains: “Integrity is wholeness, the great beauty is Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty of the universe.... Love that” (64). This is no exaggeration saying that deep ecologists are eco-humanists; they value the human being as lovingly as they value animal life as wild and invaluable. On the other hand, the social ecologist and the materialist alike care only to evaluate the relative location of the human on a hierarchical scale of importance. Scientists and humanists of our time have not risen to that level of consciousness, and in our knowledge society, wisdom and compassion do not arise uninterruptedly and playfully. Thus, deep ecology is essentially an attitude in practice to heal the wounded psyche of man and the bleeding body of the earth in their material and spiritual interactions. Thus, because of misunderstandings and philosophical differences, elitist humanists accuse the deep ecologists of ecofascism or ecologism.

Now, after the mid-twentieth century, these elitists, cultural Darwinians and anti-earth promoters contemplate to eject humanity out of a dying planet into a safer haven somewhere in outer space. Snyder’s bitter despair and anger in this regard find expression thus:

*The robots argue how to parcel out our Mother Earth
To last a little longer
Like vultures flapping
...
Belching, gurgling,
Near a dying Doe.*

(“Mother Earth: Her Whales”, *TI*)

The poet-ecologist asserts that nature is not a laboratory or a book to help uncover facts and data alone, but it is a grand, live “performance” whose deep culture is to live and let live. The natural ecologist in Snyder immediately senses the performing earth, an organic kinesis, from the activities of its “beings”:

*A scudding plume on the wave –
a humpback whale is
breaking out in air up
gulping herring*

*-Nature not a book, but a performance, a
high old culture*

(“Ripples on the Surface,” *No Nature*, p.381)

Human life is part of this ‘high old culture’, primarily integrated into “nature” as “a performance.” Therefore, nature as a living dynamism of systems, as living and performing through us all is duly recognized as Mother Earth by the primitive people as well as great visionary minds through ages.

After a *Mohawk* prayer, Snyder offers gratitude to Mother Earth:

*Gratitude to Mother Earth, sailing through night and day –
and to her soil: rich, rare, and sweet
in our minds so be it*

(“Prayer for the Great Family”, *TI*, pp.24-5)

Snyder has recognized *old-culture* value in the Mohawk Indian belief in the earth as ‘the great family,’ and he is not unaware of course of the ancient Hindu conviction (‘*Vasudha-eva-kutumbakam*’) which takes earth for “the Great Clan.” The Hopis like other Native Americans can speak of a Spider Grandmother who conscientiously ‘weaves the web of life,’ connecting all ‘to each other and to our ancestors’ (Reichard 125), and it is believed that she ‘thought the world itself into existence’ (140). Various Native American cultures believe in the universe as a cosmogony. Again, citing a ‘Tlingit or Haida Indian song’ reveals how Snyder is visibly moved by an experience to utter: “Is this real/ Is this real/ This life I am living?” in this earth, the earth being the primal source of all transformative connections (EHH, 6). S. Kodama draws attention to this aspect in Snyder and, from the Buddhist angle, observes that Snyder’s “vision quest” in Japan “has led him to his discovery of the Mahayana love of all and his identity as a family member of this precious planet” (203). No need to restate that the more ancient belief of India in ‘the world as one family’ (*vasudhaiva-kutumbakam*) is a precious principle alive today.

Thus, the poet always brings to our consciousness all the connected threads of reality and truth that underline different philosophies what he has learnt by his knowledge of Zen, Gaia, Amerindianism, Tao and Tantra, that earth is a living being, ‘the great family’ or Mother Earth. Not only this living flowing earth sings through us, but the sky also lives in us, as Snyder sees it. After offering gratitude to “Plants”, “Air”, “Wild Beings”, “Water”, and “the Sun” which are accepted as living forces in the already cited “Prayer for the Great Family” (*TI*), the poet expressed gratitude to the sky after the *Mohawk* hymn thus:

*Gratitude to the Great Sky
who holds billions of stars-and goes yet beyond that –
beyond all powers, and thoughts
and yet is within us –*

*Grandfather Space.
The Mind is his Wife.
so be it*

It is quite evident that a constant interfusion of diverse cultural ideas is perceptible in Snyder’s ecocriticism as derived from the Amerindian sources, modern science, Eastern mysticism, *Tantra* and Zen. Again, his planetary consciousness gains in cosmic significance as he conceives “space” as immanent “within us.” One recalls what Nicola Tesla the great American inventor of the twentieth century conceived of the universe. Incidentally, his meeting with Swami Vivekananda in 1896 was a historic moment of great encounter between Vedanta and science. He described “all perceptible matter comes from a primary substance, or tenuity beyond conception, filling all space, the akasha or luminiferous ether which is acted upon by the life giving Prāna or creative force, calling into existence, in never ending cycles all things and phenomena” (qtd in Kak, 2016). This would confirm the great sky (akasha) as “within us,” the vast universe as an open field filled with energy which could be harnessed to man’s benefits. It is all very enchanting to know of the commonality between the Vedic philosophy, modern science, and intuitive Amerindianism, but real Snyder is missed and

mistaken when all of the space energy is cornered and reduced to man's utility.

In other words, Snyder does not look at nature including human nature in poor light; it is his belief that we are nature. He feels therefore deeply concerned at nature's denudation. He is painfully amazed at the violent disruption of the old order of our natural co-existence toward an irrecoverable destruction. The ecosystem of "lightning rainbow great cloud tree/ dialogs of birds" is facing ruin now. The poet's criticism of Europe and the West and his genuine concern for the animals are interwoven here. The poet bemoans "Europa. 'The West'/ The bears are gone/ except Brunhilde" ("The Way West, Underground", *TI* p.5)

Inhering a belief in the reincarnation cycles and reappearance of the dead and animal spirits, he apprehends a terrible time in the same poem. Snyder has offered an apocalyptic nuance to all disorders set by man and in modern civilization.

*[...] elder wilder goddesses reborn –will race
the streets of France and Spain
with automatic guns –
in Spain.
Bears and Bison,
Red Hands with missing fingers,
Red Mushroom labyrinths;
lightning – bolt mazes,
Painted in caves.*

Underground. (TI, p.5)

The *karmic* effects and re-emergence of gods in the *kali-yuga* and the hungry spirits' gruesome ride on the ground (reminiscent of the Buddhist and Sanatana Hindu's degenerative time-cycle) may concur with certain Amerindian beliefs. Forces of violence and horror are given contemporary relevance by the poet who imagines of the avenging gods and animals rising up from the "underground" and stalking modern cities and states. "The American Indian is the vengeful ghost lurking in the back of the troubled American mind", writes Snyder. "That ghost will claim the next generation as its own. When this has happened, citizens of the USA will at last begin to be Americans, truly at home on the continent, in love with their land." (EHH, 112). The poet has quoted the chorus of a Cheyenne Indian Ghost dance – "We shall live again." (112)

IV. Conclusion

The preservation of the planet, to Snyder, does not tune in with the sole aim of protecting a longer and secure reign of the human species alone. In order that the human being realizes his joyous living and Zen vision on the earth, he will have to respect eco-diversity of living species, and use his intelligence as well as compassionate care for all life-forms. In our times of terror in its novel modern forms, ecological crises and economic disasters, growth of industrial metropolises and built environments, deep-ecology warnings cannot be ignored. Not only are the living connections with nature already severed, but, more than this, our simple and sensuous awareness of nature's beauty is also lost in our huge but strained civilization of science, economics and mathematics. Let us hope the better Zen sense may prevail.

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