The Complete View of the Whole Eventuality: Zen in Gary Snyder's "Pine Tree Tops"[1]

Aaron Hernandez

"When we hear the sound of pine trees on a windy day, perhaps the wind is just blowing, and the pine tree is just standing in the wind. That is all they are doing. But the people who listen to the wind in the tree will write a poem, or feel something unusual. That is, I think, the way everything is." – Shunryu Suzuki (*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*)

Zazen practice, Shunryu Suzuki remarks in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, is beyond gaining any idea of enlightenment. It is about expressing our original nature, beyond intellectual understanding, beyond appreciation (124). For a white, middle class, suburban male with no innate notion of, nor cultural background in Eastern spiritual practice, this remark comes to me as a great relief. With the burden of intellectual understanding and appreciation lifted from our shoulders, it would seem that I, and you, Dear Reader, are able to partake in a wholly incomplete and amateur discussion of original nature with little worry of incurring any sort of intellectual credit or debit. Poetry shares similarities with Zen in this manner, I think; one may talk and talk and talk and perhaps observe or even gain some understanding of its meaning, but to fully *access* it, practice is essential. This is not to suggest that talking is of no value. On the contrary, it is with necessity that we attempt to speak the unspeakable, think the unthinkable, and dig into a deeper participation in life with these words of ours. It is in this spirit that I will discuss the elements of Zen in Gary Snyder's poem, "Pine Tree Tops," primarily through the lens of Suzuki's text, *Zen Mind, Beginners Mind*, and with additional critical commentary where it is useful.

Much has been written on Snyder's poetry and particularly that of *Turtle Island*, the book from which "Pine Tree Tops" appears, but interestingly this particular poem has greatly eluded the critical eye, with most attention being paid to the longer poems and prose in *Turtle Island*.

[1] A copy of the poem is located at the end of this paper.

"Pine Tree Tops" is deceptively simple, the second shortest poem by word count in *Turtle Island* ("The Great Mother" contains three words fewer for a grand total of 32), and notably the *smallest* poem in terms of page space, which, for Snyder, is no arbitrary feature. What is remarkable and worth considering about "Pine Tree Tops" is how it epitomizes the Zen understanding of existence through the pluralistic concepts of being, unity, time, and knowledge within its minimal use of language and space. What is particularly interesting is the idea that language can be used paradoxically to uncover and transmit that slight tincture of original nature that ultimately cannot be embodied in language, and I aim to show this at work in Snyder's poetics. It is difficult to compartmentalize discussion of these concepts, as their deep connectedness resists clean academic dissection, but for the sake of scholarly organization and clarity, I will make every effortful attempt to do so.

What, then, is the Zen understanding of existence? Many have devoted books and many more have devoted lives to answering that question, so one would expect a complex, even labyrinthine answer. To Suzuki, however, things are not so complicated. Zen is fundamentally and simply about expressing our original nature, not for the sake of some external form of enlightenment, or any external cause for that matter, but only for ourselves (27). To express one's original nature, one must practice, and to practice, one must sit and breathe to begin gaining awareness of one's own being. Suzuki elaborates on the importance of breathing:

> We say "inner world" or "outer world", but actually there is just one whole world. In this limitless world our throat is like a swinging door... If you think, "I breathe," the "I" is extra... What we call "I" is just a swinging door when we inhale and when we exhale... When we become truly ourselves, we just become a swinging door, and we are purely independent of, and at the same time dependent upon everything. (29-31)

Throughout the text, Suzuki emphasizes the idea of eliminating dualism, especially between inner being and outer world, and accepting the so called "is-ness" of the world, to borrow a term from Richard Baker's introduction to the text. This is where we encounter the paradoxical idea of

interconnectedness, that we/everything are/is simultaneously independent of and dependent upon everything else. For Snyder, language works similarly: "it goes two ways: it enables us to have a small window onto an independently existing world, but it also shapes - via its very structures and vocabularies - how we see the world" (*A Place in Space* 174). Language, then, as a system independent from the individual, begins to actively occupy the space between the world and the independent mind. In this way, language creates a fluid tension of dependence, constantly shaping and being shaped by the very world and mind that brings it to bear.

We see this creation materialize in "Pine Tree Tops" through the grammar and syntax with a series of images that display this independence/dependence relation that is characteristic of Zen. Every line of the poem with the exception of the last is devoted to a different concrete image, some lines several, that stand independent of each other, but due to the utterly exposed nature of the images and fluency with which they run together as the poem is read, each image enriches the one that precedes and the one that follows. We see not just a stack of images but rather a mosaic forming itself into a single image as the poem progresses. Even the title, which, by definition, is apart from that which it is naming, is incorporated into the poem seamlessly through the syntax. In the second and third line, "the sky glows / *with* the moon," (italics mine) each glowing independently in the same aura of light and it is also *with* the moon that the "pine tree tops / bend snow-blue" in the following lines. The tree tops fade into the sky becoming at once a part of it and remaining essentially apart from it. Snyder's language doesn't just create a world for readers, it allows readers to create a world themselves.

Though the influence of Zen Buddhism on the work of Gary Snyder is well documented, the Chinese poetry of the T'ang Dynasty has also been acknowledged by Snyder himself to have

greatly influenced his poetics (*The Real Work* 19). Jody Norton provides in-depth insight into T'ang shih poetry:

> Numerous characteristics of the shih are attributable to the nature of the Chinese language itself. Chinese is uninflected, and its nouns lack gender and number as well as case. The nouns of the T'ang shih, in turn, tend to be concrete, denoting objects rather than abstractions, but are typically not individualized... These lines lack not only verbs and verbals, but connectives, prepositions, and articles as well. *They consist of a selection of nominal elements organized in a highly elliptical syntactical relation which 'strongly suggests the actuality of the situation'* (Yip, 25), but for which a fixed imaginative synthesis has not yet been prescribed... It is a poetry of image rather an idea, in which the images are neither fully drawn nor explicitly located, and in which the precise nature of their interrelationships is not defined. (168-169, italics mine)

Reading this, the influence of the T'ang shih in "Pine Tree Tops" becomes immediately apparent. One may even say the influence appears direct. The key words here for the poem are "actuality of the situation," which is both beyond and short of using an image simply as a distillate of some greater thought or conception. Snyder doesn't describe with words, he paints with them; the poem doesn't *say* anything but rather it *shows* through very minimal, simple language. The key to this process is the organization, or the syntax of the words and how they are modified with grammar. The placement of a comma after "frost haze" becomes more interesting when it is noticed that there is no comma after either "the sky glows" or "with the moon". This is what allows the sky to glow with the moon *and* allows the moon to bend with the pine trees. We can picture this quite easily, the moon bending with the trees if we think of the shape of a half moon in the sky. Though it is not actually bending, the light that shines upon it and uncovers the enshrouding darkness allows us to see it bend before our eyes.

It is of course not uncommon in poetry to witness an upheaval of the rules and strictures of grammar and Snyder's upheaval is neither without purpose nor effect. Deviation from "proper

English" is what allows the poem to express itself so potently in such concise terms. Robert Kern, writing on the prosody of Snyder's lyrics writes:

> What seems freely and naturally colloquial on the page, moreover, may turn out to be not speech at all, but a kind of inward, unaddressed meditation, a form of thinking, that depends for its effect on indeterminate patterning and run-on or discontinuous or otherwise unordered syntax- a prosody, we might say, that organizes into verse both voiced speech and the silent speech of thought. (107)

What we are getting at with "the silent speech of thought" is close to what we might ironically call an escape from language. This escape from language is central to Buddhist thought and becomes mired in paradox as one begins to question how language can possibly help us escape language itself. Snyder helps elucidate the thought:

> And the other heart of Buddhist experience is something that can't be talked about. Sometimes it can be hinted at or approached in poems... it's not that it can't be reached. Simply that you can't talk about it. It's an inner order of experience that is not available to language. Language has no words to talk about it... The true poem is walking that edge between what can be said and that which cannot be said. (*The Real Work* 21)

The "it" that remains out of reach of language is what we can call "original nature". And it is not just *our* original nature, but *the* original nature, the nature of the trees and the moon and the snow and us is all one in the sense of each being unto itself and each a part of the other. So how does the poet walk that edge? Snyder explains:

> The way to see *with* language, to be free with it and to find it a vehicle of self-transcending insight, is to know both mind and language extremely well and to play with their many possibilities without any special attachment. In doing this, a language may yield up surprises and angles that amaze us and that can lead back to unmediated direct experience. (*A Place in Space* 174)

The language of "Pine Tree Tops" expresses, hints at, or approaches this. I offer all three options because for all that Snyder can write, the poem requires the reader to create/complete the experience through reading. And what might be a better word than reading is actually participation, or practice.

The student of Zen does not sit once and express his or her original nature and move on entirely. Suzuki professes, "What makes your practice deeper is deeper is the day-by-day effort of sitting... Dogen Zenji's famous words concerning this are, 'Hitting the mark is the result of ninety-nine failures.' The last arrow hit the mark, but only after ninety-nine failures. So failure is actually okay" (*not always so* 14). In the same manner, one does not read a poem once and experience the nature of that poem. Rather, one must read and read again and then reread, digging into the poem and letting it become something in the mind. The way Snyder constructs this poem, with a certain amount of grammatical and syntactical ambiguity, lends itself to a deeper and meditative participation in the actual creation of the poem. Norton notes this quality in Snyder's work:

> Spaces are created both in the figuring forth of the imagery and in the poems' syntactical and structural chains, in order to draw the reader into an imaginative actualization of situations and events that have been minimally suggested by the selected, juxtaposed images of the text. Such imaginative activity may, in turn, lead on to a wordless recognition of the true nature of what is thus envisioned. (169)

Just as each reader has their own unique rhythm of breathing, walking, talking, each of us will have a unique conception of a "true nature" in part because true nature, or Buddha nature, according to Zen thought, already exists in each of us and each thing and the true nature of the tree and the true nature of the self are a part of the same nature (Suzuki and Brown 16). To understand this we must keep the independence and interdependence of all things at the forefront of our minds.

Sound too becomes increasingly interesting in this sense and creates an effect easily overlooked when only considering the poem on the page in the silence of one's own head rather than verbally and aurally. The words, acting as independent units, when strung together in such a way, create a rhythm of assonance, consonance, and rhyme that binds them and gives

relationship between them and the images they create. Not only do we hear this rhythm but we experience it physically, we feel it in our mouths as we read the poem. With the word “pine,” the poem begins on the lips, the threshold of our swinging doorway between outer and inner worlds, and from the alliterative consonance of “tree tops” in the front the mouth, begins to move further inward to the back of the palate when the “sky glows” and finally “with the moon / pine tree tops” the sounds move again to the front of our mouth. It is worth noting that this level of being, already innate to the poem, requires the participation of the reader and more importantly the reader’s voice, which, itself, is dependent upon the swinging door of breaththing, to bring the movement of “Pine Tree Tops” to fruition.

The image that finally materializes is picturesque and notably simple: pine trees in a winter sky amid human and animal tracks in the snow. It is understandably easy to pass over the poem in its simplicity and brevity, regard it as a nice little imagist poem and move on. But Zen teaches that this ordinary connectedness of independent beings, the very everyday-ness of our lives is immensely important:

> Oneness is valuable but variety is also wonderful. Ignoring variety, people emphasize the one absolute existence, but that is a one-sided understanding. In this understanding there is a gap between variety and oneness. But oneness and variety are the same thing, so oneness should be appreciated in each existence. That is why we emphasize everyday life rather than some particular state of mind. We should find the reality in each moment and in each phenomenon. (Suzuki 119)

Snyder injects that shot of reality with the sound-image in line 7, “the creak of boots.” This is notably the first instance of human presence in the poem and lends to it a verisimilar reality that any inhabitant of a snow covered landscape will recognise. We are not dealing with some ethereal mystic seer interpreting the world, but more likely someone, anyone, simply out for a winter night walk. With the “I” subject of the poem absent (or as Suzuki puts it, “extra... What we call “I” is just a swinging door when we inhale and when we exhale” as quoted above)

readers are drawn further into the imaginative process, as aforementioned by Norton, and so the "creak" of boots, that is, the sound or sound-image is allowed to become the readers'. In line 8, "rabbit tracks, deer tracks," the invocation of a former animal presence makes us aware of the independence/dependence that other life forms share with humans and the world. Our tracks mingle with theirs, or rather our tracks and their tracks are the same; they are simply the tracks of life moving across a living planet. This equivalency is essential to the Buddhist ontology of life. Snyder has explained in an interview that through meditation he has had the perception that "the life of a stone or a weed is as completely beautiful and authentic, wise and valuable as the life of, say, an Einstein" (*The Real Work* 17). Here, Buddhism finds an overlap with the bioregionalist movement (of which, Snyder is no less aware) in its respect for life and the earth. Jim Dodge writes:

> What I think most bioregionalists have in common is a profound regard for life- all life, not just white Americans, or humankind entire, but frogs, roses, mayflies, coyotes, lichens: all of it: the gopher snake and the gopher. For instance we don't want to save the whales for the sweetsie-poo, lily-romantic reason attributed to us by those who profit from their slaughter;... we want to save them for the most selfish of reasons; without them, we are diminished. (Living by Life, 359)

Snyder's veneration for all life, no less selfish, goes beyond the recognition that we are a part of all of life and that the death of any life is in part our own death. Michael Castro notes, "Snyder's [poems] reflect an acute awareness of living nature, a sense of intelligence to be found there, and a respectful, observant, participatory relationship with it akin to the Native Americans" (132). There is actually something to be learned from the trees and the moonlight but to do so requires one to *listen*, to participate in *being* rather than doing, possessing or knowing. It should also be noted the importance of lines 7 and 8 in that tracks imply the presence of paths, a significant image in Buddhism. One of the meanings of the word 'Buddha' is "he who has followed the path" (Suzuki 11). Even the lines on the page form a path across and downwards, a path from the

tree tops in the blue night across and downward to the ground we stand upon, to "what do we know." As we read we follow the pathway and though it is short and it is small, if we participate, observe and listen, we may find a world of richness in the subtle sway of the trees, in the tracks in the snow.

It is important to note the effect of the present tense in the poem on the way it is read and/or heard. The pine trees bend and fade in the moment our eyes or our ears encounter each line. No matter how many times the poem is read it is forever in the present and like Suzuki's swinging door, always moving. But it is not only the present that moves. The animal tracks in line 8 imply not just past movement, but movement of the past into the present. The pluralism of time is an important quality in the poem and is closely tied to freedom in Zen thought, as Suzuki explains:

> Dogen-zenji said, "Time goes from present to past." This is absurd, but in our practice sometimes it is true. Instead of time progressing from past to present, it goes backwards from present to past... This is not true in our logical mind, but it is in the actual experience of making past time present. There we have poetry, and there we have human life. When we experience this kind of truth it means we have found the true meaning of time. Time constantly goes from past to present and from present to future. This is true, but it is also true that time goes from future to present and from present to past... This is vital freedom. (33-34)

This has a major implication in the possible reading of the poem. If time goes from the present to the past, what happens if when we get to the end of the poem, we retrace our path into the past by reading the poem backwards? We get this:

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

PINE TREE TOPS

The poem reads remarkably backwards and in a very similar way to the original reading. Of particular interest is the effect this has on the last line, but I will address that further below. For now, it is enough to note that syntactically the poem reads nearly just as well from the bottom to the top as the top to the bottom, or from the sky to the earth and earth to the sky. In either direction through time, it would seem to have us focus simply on what *is*. As in the selected epigraph for this paper, Suzuki says that sometimes “perhaps the wind is just blowing, and the pine tree is just standing in the wind. That is all that is happening.” But it is those who *listen* who may feel something unusual, maybe even profound in the simple is-ness of things.

By reading the poem back and forth, up and down, we can recall Suzuki’s swinging door metaphor for zazen breathing. The poem, like the swinging door, “just moves; that is all” (29). But to go into the past and end at the beginning is to find oneself inescapably in the present. If we read the poem yet again from top to bottom, in a sense we are returning to the past, experiencing the poem again, and simultaneously into the future, experiencing the poem in an inevitably new way. The effect of sound in creating this sense of a malleable time consciousness, while always present, becomes even greater as the poem is experienced in repetition. Sounds echo throughout the lines: blue/moon/blue/boots/do, night/starlight, sky/sky. Similar sounds operate dialogically in that they simultaneously recall similar sounds in previous lines and anticipate similar sounds that come later. In this sense, we create temporal paths of recollection and anticipation into the past and future. By pulling together past and future we may experience more of the poem in the present rather than be tied to the temporal progression of our reading. The words and sounds weave together the images through the lines and over the lines, bringing the whole poem into a single point of being outside of form and time. This kind of vital freedom

from time is what Suzuki calls "perfect freedom" and "it is to acquire this perfect freedom that we practice zazen" (34).

In this freedom we also have unity. The beginning and the end are brought together and this crossover of form is akin to the crossing over of the legs that forms the foundation of zazen posture. Suzuki explains:

> When we cross our legs like this, even though we have a right leg and a left leg, they have become one. The position expresses the oneness of duality: not two, and not one. This is the most important teaching: not two, and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think they are one, that is also wrong. Our body and mind and both two *and* one. (25, italics Suzuki's)

Plurality, the notion that things simultaneously are and are not, is one of the central concepts to Zen thought and is emphasized repeatedly throughout Suzuki's text. This plurality pervades the idea of existence according to Buddhist thought, which says life contains both existence and non-existence (110). Suzuki elaborates, "The bird both exists and doesn't exist at the same time... We say true existence comes from emptiness and goes back again into emptiness. What appears from emptiness is true existence... So we say true understanding will come out of emptiness" (110-111). In a way, the last line of the poem, "what do we know." is the most interesting in this sense because we are presented with a clear example of the plurality of existence in language. It is a question yet it is not a question. It is a statement but in the wording of a question. Because, unlike the rest of the poem, this line presents no visual image, we want to read it in relation to the poem to try to make sense of the question/statement. Is it asking or is it telling? But perhaps there is a better way to look at it. According to Zen thought, "[r]elative mind is the mind which sets itself in relation to other things, thus limiting itself. It is this small mind which creates gaining ideas and leaves traces of itself" (Suzuki, 62). In contrast to this is the big mind which experiences everything within itself (Suzuki, 35). To consider everything, the entire is-ness of

the line, one feels the amplitudes of both question and statement cross over into a node cancelling each other out, the value zero. It is even a struggle to read according to its own grammar. It seeks no answer, it professes nothing. But if we return to our notion of time, and read the poem backwards, this line is read more easily as a statement (what do we know. / what we do know.) and what follows is the simple observation of the world, the is-ness of the world that exists in our mind, that is, in our big mind and on the page, independently, yet dependent upon each other. Read again from top to bottom, what follows the ambiguous question/statement, "what do we know." is the considerable emptiness of the blank page, nothingness. There is no solace offered for the ambiguity. All we have is space. This reading, too, aligns with Buddhist thought, as Suzuki notes, "Instead of gathering knowledge you should clear your mind. If your mind is clear, true knowledge is already yours. When you know everything you are like a dark sky. Sometimes a flashing will come through a dark sky. After it passes you forget all about it, and there is nothing left but the dark sky" (84). In Zen practice, meditation is the quest for emptiness. And in emptiness we may find the infinity of the universe. For Snyder, meditation inevitably follows this path: "One may start exploring a way but they will all come back to the complete view of the whole eventuality, which is a trip to the ground floor of being, below and more fundamental than any kind of mental content, any symbols or any archetypes or visions" (*The Real Work* 18). When the poem is read from top to bottom we begin in the dark sky and end in emptiness. When we read from bottom to top we begin in emptiness and end in the dark sky. At the very ground floor of being, that is what we know, the is-ness and the emptiness. That is the plurality of knowledge in "Pine Tree Tops."

But we know knowledge is not the only instance of plurality in the poem. All of time is present in the poem *in the present*: the past in the present, the present in the past, and the

inescapable movement towards the future as we experience the poem's movement back and forth, up and down. The images too stand independent of one another and depend on each other to form the complete mosaic image. And it is the final image, both, the image of the physical words on the page, and the image created by the words (not two, not one), that resides independently on the page and independently in the mind of the reader/listener but of course always relies upon the dependence between mind and text for it to exist. This is the Zen of "Pine Tree Tops." As a reader, we let the words through the swinging door of the mind to form an image that is and is not there. If we listen with care we can begin to discern the pervasiveness of rhythm in our language, in our bodies, and in the earth. By paying attention to the independence of our rhythms and how we ultimately depend and ride on the rhythms of the world, we may see a glimpse of what it means to be human here. We see the pine trees swaying and fading, folding into the night light aura of the moon and the stars, but we don't really see it: all we see are some words on a page. It exists, yet it does not. And eventually, all returns to emptiness.

Works Cited

Castro, Michael . "Gary Snyder: The Lessons of *Turtle Island*." *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*. Ed. Patrick D. Murphy. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991. 131-143. Print.

Dodge, Jim. "Living By Life: Some Bioregional Theory and Practice." *CoEvolution Quarterly* 32: 6-12. Web. 28 Apr. 2014.

Kern, Robert . "Silence in Prosody." *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*. Ed. Patrick D. Murphy Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991. 105-121. Print.

Norton, Jody. "The Importance of Nothing." *Critical Essays on Gary Snyder*. Ed. Patrick D. Murphy. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991. 166-187. Print.

Snyder, Gary. *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Watersheds: New and Selected Prose*. Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1995. Print.

---. *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks, 1964-1979*. New York : New Directions, 1980. Print.

---. *Turtle Island*. New York: New Directions, 1974. Print.

Suzuki, Shunryu, and Edward Espe Brown. *not always so: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen*. New York: HarperCollins, 2002. Print.

Suzuki, Shunryu. *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. Seventh printing. New York & Tokyo: Weatherhill, Inc., 2004. Print.

PINE TREE TOPS

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.

Gary Snyder