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"New Elemental Force": the Necessity of an Engaged Poetry

Mary Ann Davis

What is poetry if it cannot save nations of people?
— Czeslaw Milosz

Because of the Beat generation and the endurance of such poets as Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Anne Waldman, Buddhism, particularly Zen, has proven amazingly influential in the realm of American poetry (Seager 35). The impact of this religious tradition on American poets manifests itself in the publication of a number of contemporary poetry anthologies focused on American Buddhist poets. As the preface to Beneath a Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry notes, these anthologies illustrate "the wide diversity of options at hand within a rich and complex spiritual tradition" (Johnson and Paulenich xviii), seen in the expansion of style, rhetoric, and theme since the Beats. Something else, however, circulates in the poetry emerging from contemporary American Buddhists. Another anthology, Premonitions: the Kaya Anthology of New Asian North American Poetry, points to this divergent feeling, critiquing the diversity heralded in Beneath a Single Moon as an "American Buddhism... apparently only speakable by Non-Asian Americans.” The editor, Walter K. Lew, proceeds to note

[...]the 45 American poets whose essays and poetry on Buddhist practice comprise the anthology are all Caucasian, and the book only mentions Asians as distal teachers... not as fellow members or poets of the sangha.... Whatever the social tensions that exist between such groups, the lack of Asian Americans... belies [the anthology’s] stated ideal of comprehensive co-existence beneath a light that illuminates all evenly. (582)

Poetry is not the only area of Buddhism in which diversity is being pushed to the forefront. Especially in the West, Buddhism has shifted to a new level of practice intently focused on diversity and social issues, such as women’s liberation, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights, environmentalism, and human rights. This type of practice is known as socially engaged Buddhism, or the application of Buddhist teachings to issues in contemporary society (Seager 201; Queen 1). That Buddhist American poetry should be connected (sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously) with engaged Buddhism is not surprising: as Richard Seager notes, much of the Beat writing "was the expression of a spiritual revolt with political overtones... paving the way for identifying the dharma with social and political criticism, a trend that would become more pronounced in... the following decades" (42). That "trend" spreads now, from large well-structured organizations working for the freedom of Tibet from the Chinese, to the daily compassionate interactions between two people, each originating from the universal vision of interdependence. Premonitions breaks a silence in American poetry by bringing to the page Asian American poets, some of them Buddhists, a move which might qualify as an engaged Buddhist act. A more apt question pushes into the realm of poetry itself—can there exist an engaged poetry, a poetry that, whether consciously or unconsciously, works toward some social change at some fundamental level? By considering the evolving concept of socially engaged Buddhism, especially the aspect of "witnessing,” alongside the writings of the poets Czeslaw Milosz and Jane Hirshfield, a truly engaged poetry will emerge as necessary to both the poet and to the people of the world in which she or he writes.

The Fourth Yāna?

The exceptional quality of the twentieth century is not determined by jet as means of transportation or a decrease in infant mortality or the birth-control pill. It is determined by humanity’s emergence as a new elemental force.

—Czeslaw Milosz

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I know I’m out of touch with the world,
that Eastern Europe is on fire,
the suffering and terror continues,
bad jokes, bad jobs.

I cannot guess
what this poem wants to be, growing
long leaves and veiled buds into my life
through chaos and clutter. This poem says
it doesn’t want to end; it has strength
like rain, or human loss. It wants
to hold everything, it wants to rise up
amid the ordinary course of our lives.

—Patricia Y. Ikeda,
from “Wild Iris”4

To encapsulate the evolution of Buddhism, the Vajrayāna tradition has termed each major shift in teachings to be a “turning” of the Wheel of Dharma. Thus far, the Wheel has circled three times: the classical teachings of the Hinayāna (or Theravāda) tradition, the reform teachings of the Mahāyāna tradition, and the syncretic tradition of the Vajrayāna. While socially engaged Buddhism takes from the Mahāyāna tradition in that “the touchstone ... is a vision of interdependence, in which the universe is experienced as an organic whole, every ‘part’ affecting the other ‘part’” (Kraft xvii), many scholars argue that socially engaged Buddhism stands unprecedented because of its emphasis on social and political change; some go so far as to consider socially engaged Buddhism as the fourth Yāna (Queen 22-6). Suffice it to say that socially engaged Buddhism radically re-works the teachings of the Buddha to change, for the better, world society and politics as they exist today. As Christopher Queen notes in his introduction to Engaged Buddhism in the West,

Socially engaged Buddhism is grounded in a fundamental hierarchy of needs, in which the “higher” mental and emotional goals of salvation and the personal cessation of suffering are often postponed to fulfill the more immediate needs of the self and the surrounding others. Salvation and the end of suffering are achieved in this sense only after or at the same time as everything and everyone else is gaining the same level.

During the Vietnam War, Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh, confronted with such a hierarchy, coined the term “engaged Buddhism” as he struggled to understand and stop the horrors occurring in his country (Hunt-Percy and Fine 38). Through his continued teachings, engaged Buddhism took root and spread to the West, where it flourished into the varieties found today. Socially engaged Buddhism connects with the world through the cultivation of awareness, or a mindfulness through meditation and remembering; identification, or the sense of the supreme interdependence of all things and all beings; and, most importantly, action, summed up in Nhat Hanh’s pithy phrase, “Once there is seeing, there must be acting” (Queen 6).

Though consensus on a general definition of socially engaged Buddhism is easy to reach, socially engaged Buddhists don’t always agree, especially on the “term and notion of ‘engagement’ itself” (Queen 7). Queen cites Ken Jones’ continuum of socially engaged Buddhism, from “soft”—those actions based on personal experience—to “hard” socially engaged Buddhism—those rooted in social analysis and activism—which Queen presents as paralleling “mindfulness-based practice” versus “service-based practice” (8-9). Despite criticisms of Nhat Hanh’s engaged Buddhism as either too engaged or not engaged enough, Thich Nhat Hanh’s teachings remain the most flexible in interpretation and application:

Mindfulness must be engaged.
Once there is seeing, there must be acting . . .
We must be aware of the real problems of the world . . .
Then, with mindfulness, we will know what to do, and what not to do, to be of help. (quoted in Hunt-Percy and Fine 62; emphasis mine)

While engaged Buddhism is distinct because of its focus on social and political activism and reformation, the choice of vehicle used to apply Buddhist teachings toward social change is left to the individual. In his article entitled “Meditation, Healing, and Stress Reduction,” Andrew Olendzki argues for the ultimate importance of mindfulness-based practice, such as meditation, which might be considered a “soft” form of socially engaged Buddhism. “Unlike other
forms of engaged Buddhism [meditation] is not interacting with oppressive social institutions, or with the makers of war or the breakers of peace, or with those who violate human rights or ravage the environment.” Mindfulness-based practice engages the self, and “deeply seated attitudes and conditioning. Let us not underestimate the heroic nature of this struggle... It may be possible to engage the mind without significantly changing the larger world we all share, but it is not possible to engage the world except through engagement with the mind” (323). Even the “hardest” engaged Buddhists cannot enact their changes in the world without first enacting it within themselves. This view leads directly back to the notion of interdependence, so central to socially engaged Buddhism—people must see the need for change in themselves that they want to change in the world, recognizing that within each person rests the potential to act just like the enemy.

Writing poetry can be viewed as a way to reach the level of mindfulness where change can occur in the world. The engagement of poetry in the world necessarily involves the engagement of language, because language, “with its sinuous syntax is . . . completely natural and vital, part of what and who we are. Poetry is the leap off—or into—that” (Snyder 4). Language gives us the tool to understand what is both outside and inside our bodies, the internal and the external happenings. Buddhist philosophies of language, however, reflect a mistrust of what are viewed as easily manipulated, and thus deceptive words:

As convention, language has a certain validity, but its claim to represent something more than convention or to depict reality are spurious. The experience of reality as such, or of things as they are ‘before language,’ is the experience of the highest goal, the ultimate meaning, or the most real object. Although this experience lies beyond all linguistic procedures or operations, beyond all conceptualization, it is accessible only through some form of linguistic index. Thus linguistic convention, while merely conventional and relative, is necessary for liberation as well as for everyday practical activities. (Gómez 458)

Buddhists recognize the inherent non-duality of language. Nhat Hanh illustrating this clearly by stating, “If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper” (Understanding 3). From the beginning of his commentary on the Heart Sutra, in which Nhat Hanh explains the essence of interbeing (non-duality), he associates poets with the extraordinary ability to see beyond the surface of things. Poets (not just Buddhist poets) understand that all language is, to a degree, only a construction of the world around us, that it is empty of any meaning except that which we give it. Poets also recognize the duality of the non-duality of language—that only by existing in the arena of language can the “before language” experience, described as liberating, become possible. To find meaning, a poet must use and be used by language. Thus, in language use rests both restriction and liberation, an interdependence which requires words to be employed with awareness, with complete mindfulness.

Poetry pulls both the reader and poet close to the edge of language, as do any of the ways in which words are manipulated. Jane Hirshfield, a contemporary American Buddhist poet, notes that “in poetry, awareness is through language, through the verbal mind, but also through the body and breath, by way of the music of words, the rhythm of thought” (151). In the writing of poetry, the balance of mind and body that characterizes mindfulness, or meditation, can be cultivated. Meditation is characterized as arriving at the true self while simultaneously stepping back to consider and explore that true self. To Hirshfield, “it has seemed... that poetry and zazen are parallel and continuous paths: each is an expression of the self in its most complete nature joined with an exploration of the nature of that self... We write poetry or sit zazen not to become something other than ourselves, a buddha or a mirror, but to know in these activities the original face of our lives” (150) — synchronous steps inward and outward that place us in deeper consideration of who we really are. This is the way in which poetry engages the poet first, a necessity before poetry can affect any kind of social change, Buddhist or non-Buddhist. But poetry can indeed engage in social change, because as Queen notes, “[T]here is no admissions test for engaged Buddhism: ‘All Buddhism is engaged’ (Thich Nhat Hanh); ‘Buddhism has always been engaged’ (Robert Thurman); ‘The private meditator is as engaged as the social worker when that practice embraces the wholeness of life, promotes healing, and reconnects him or her to a larger community of living beings’ (Bernie Glassman)” (24).

Witnessing

It would be decorous not to live. To live is not decorous,
Says he who after many years
Returned to the city of his youth. There was no one left
Of those who once walked those streets.
And now they had nothing, except his eyes.
If ever we accede to enlightenment,
He thought, it is in one compassionate moment
When what separated them from me vanishes
And a shower of drops from a bunch of lilacs
Pours on my face, and hers, and his, at the same time.

—Czeslaw Milosz,
from "City of My Youth"

Soto Zen priest Alan Senauke, for an article in Turning Wheel, described a socially engaged act in which he and approximately 75 other Buddhist students and meditators participated on the night of the execution of a death row prisoner in California. They stood in the rain and bore “witness,” or “the bodhisattva’s radical act of complete acceptance and non-duality” (15). Not only did they mark this event as important by serving as silent spectators; in their witnessing they also recognized unity, by comprehending the possibility for the same violence within themselves: “I felt a moment of deep connection: black-robed meditators sitting upright in attention in the rain, protecting beings as best we know how; black-jacketed police officers standing at attention in the rain, protecting beings as best they know how” (15). There is a difference in the two actions, but the positions could just as easily have been the reverse. Bearing witness, in the socially engaged Buddhist sense, means marking an act as important by drawing attention to it, pressing it into memory, while also witnessing the universality of all people in all situations.

The term witness has deep connections with poetry, without any deliberate links to engaged Buddhism. In 1981, Carolyn Forché published her book of poems entitled The Country Between Us, each poem depicting the political and social horrors occurring in El Salvador. In 1993, she edited and introduced the anthology entitled Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness, in which she gathered poems worldwide that witness “dark times” (29) and “extremity” (30). This work, like her earlier collection of poems, broke ground because it refused to adhere to the unspoken rule of not “mixing... the mutually exclusive realms of the personal and the political” in poetry (30). However, here again is where Walter K. Lew points out a gap: Forché focused her “witnessing” outside of the United States, neglecting poetry written about the human atrocities committed to the Native Americans and the Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the United States (581). In this way, while Forché emphasizes a balance of the personal and the political, she misses the necessary self-critiquing aspect of social engagement. Carolyn Forché is not Buddhist and did not base her anthology on engaged Buddhist principles, yet her unconsciously narrow selectivity points to holes in her philosophy. The witnessing must be personal, but it must also be personal in the way that realizes the self is at fault as well—otherwise, a deeper connection is missed.

Another instance of witnessing in poetry comes with Czeslaw Milosz’s The Witness of Poetry, published in 1983. Milosz is a Polish exiled poet, who witnessed World War II in his homeland and refused to leave until forcibly exiled in 1951 because of his publicly ambivalent views on communism. His explanation for entitling the book The Witness of Poetry is “not because we witness [poetry], but because it witnesses us” (2). As previously noted, poetry writing brings the poet to a full confrontation with her or himself. In witnessing the poet, poetry also witnesses the world constructing the poet's reality, a world which the poet tries to make into reality of the poem, as well. Milosz illustrates this vicious, yet essential circle:

Reality calls for a name, for words, but it is unbearable, and if it is touched, if it draws very close, the poet's mouth cannot even utter a complaint of Job: all art proves to be nothing compared with action. Yet to embrace reality in such a manner that it is preserved in all its old tangle of good and evil, of despair and hope, is possible only thanks to a distance... but this in turn seems then a moral treason” (Nobel 13).

Milosz is not a Buddhist, but he speaks directly to a social engagement of poetry. A supreme reality expressed through poetry is nearly unbearable because it gets so close to the self; thus poetry must also take a step backwards to embrace fully the reality, and prevent a complete saturation of the poem in personal subjectivism. When poetry witnesses, it shows an intense picture of the self. Through that self the world gains enough distance to make the reality visible—and real. It is not a true action, a true retaliation against the world that we so wish to change. Action, however, is just as idealistic as language—the non-violent marches and protests of some socially engaged Buddhists never act enough to reverse what weapons of war only seem able to. If people are attached to idealistic views of poetry and action, the Buddha's essential teaching of the impermanence of all things reveals these ideals as crumbling in the end. Only with the simultaneous step into the self and step out of the world, a balance of proximity and distance, the personal and the political, can both...
poets and readers approach tasting the crave reality. “[N]o science or philos-ophy can change the fact that a poet stands before reality that is everyday new, miraculously complex, inexhaustible, and tries to enclose it as much as possible in words” (Witness 56). Though nonviolence is never as immediately active as violence, it is the only path which leads to the true end of an otherwise ceaseless cycle of violence. Similarly, a poem might witness to an event, but it does not engage in true witnessing unless the poet—the one who witnesses—is also witnessed and turned into a lens through which readers will gain a glimpse of the connectedness of all.

The Net of Connection

Poetry ... has sometimes been perceived as dangerous to the spiritual career, but also poems have been called upon to express the most delicate and profound spiritual understanding.

—Gary Snyder

Three times my life has opened.
Once, into darkness and rain.
Once, into what the body carries at all times within it and starts
to remember each time it enters the act of love.
Once, to the fire that holds all.
These three were not different.
You will recognize what I am saying or you will not.
But outside my window all day a maple has stepped from her leaves
like a woman in love with winter, dropping the colored silks.
Neither are we different in what we know.
There is a door. It opens. Then it is closed. But a slip of light
stays, like a scrap of unreadable paper left on the floor,
or the one red leaf the snow releases in March.

—Jane Hirshfield,
“Three Times My Life Has Opened”

At the heart of the universe, everything is connected; at the heart of poetry, what is revealed about the poet in turn reveals something about the world, and connects that reality into meaning. Our Buddhist American poet Jane Hirshfield elaborates:

At the heart of how poetry works is a dynamic connection sus-pended in emptiness: the connection between words and under-standing is always a leap across a void, but in poetry, the nature of this leap is made visible. By working near the limits of speech or imagination, a poem raises both connective power and the openness of language up to consciousness. (151; emphasis mine)

In the case of poetry, the void is the event the poet is called to witness, whether it is to the dailiness of a housewife, to the raw solitude of an abandoned lover, to the graphic shock of a war-torn country—poetry must connect a web of meaning over this void between the poet and the reader, the language of the poem and the understanding of the poem. The poem connects the poet to the world (the “void”), forming a reality Milosz describes as “unbearable”; in turn, the poet throws this line across the void, forming the connection between the poet and the audience. Such a connective net is the poet’s self offered to the reader as a gift, as a way in which to interpret the seemingly incomprehensible events of this world. Snyder explains this offering, saying that an “accomplished poem, like an exemplary life, is a brief presentation, a uniqueness in the oneness, a complete expression, and a kind of gift exchange in the mind-energy webs” (7).

We must make use of the mind-energy webs which connect us for the transmis-sion of gifts, rather than pain. This is the socially-conscious level of poetry that most poets neglect as they wait for “inspiration” to strike. The ability, however, to make this poetry come alive gives an immeasurable power to the poet.

Another connective power is the simple power of language that poets hold. As Milosz says, “The exile of the poet is today a simple function of a relatively recent discovery: that whoever wields power is also able to control language” (Nobel 13). This power, previously used wrongly in propaganda and censorship, when put into the hands of the poet becomes a tool of great unification. For Hirshfield, this connection draws together a sangha of Buddhists and non-Buddhists, all of whom share with her the understanding of experience (152). Thich Nhat Hanh notes that “[e]ven if we are a skilled meditator and well versed in the sutras, if we don’t know how to build a sangha, we cannot help others” (qtd. in Hunt-Percy and Fine 54). More important than the mindfulness need-ed to engage socially in the world is the ability to connect people into support-ive sanghas. From the sangha we learn responsibility, which Hirshfield connects directly to the Mahāyāna postponement of nirvāṇa:
If poets have a task for which they are responsible to the culture as a whole, to those who share their time and those who follow, I feel that task is to create language that can enable and convey just such a deep experience, or subtle experience, or wide experience, and help that knowledge pass from life to life. The job of poetry is to create and enlarge a true understanding, to help the poet and everyone awaken together to the nature of our lives through the clarifying possibilities of words... Here is the bodhisattva vow, not to enter the realm of enlightenment until all other living beings (down to the last blade of grass, the bodhisattva would say) are saved from delusion as well. (152-3)

Understanding the connective power of poetry, poets must utilize it: "Once there is seeing, there must be acting." Poetry has the power to become socially engaged in the world, even for non-Buddhist poets. The "deep experiences" of the poet should filter the world into a reality that is understandable to their audience. More than filter, the poet should become the world in which she writes. She must get down to the core of herself, which in the end is not separable from what's outside of herself. She is the world around her, and if she brings herself and the world to the page as honestly as possible, then she brings something for others to grasp, in order to awaken to their essential interbeing with the poet.

Milosz's "witness of poetry" steps beyond Forché's "poetry of witness" in that the poet relinquishes any control she or he might have over the poem, by letting the self be witnessed as well. While Forché does right in calling for a remembrance through words, this remembrance must encompass more than the simple event of the poem. It must remember to be awake, to look into the self in order to see the world and everyone else; and as Hirshfield says, "help that knowledge pass from life to life." Thich Nhat Hanh surmises this need well: "We may try to be awake, but society keeps us forgetful. It is so difficult to practice awareness in this society" (37). Poems not only must remind us of the world in which we live, but also how to remember this world, how to always draw from it and be aware of it. Milosz, in an amazing chain of connection, sees the same need: "Our planet that gets smaller every year, with its fantastic proliferation of mass media, is witnessing a process that escapes definition, characterized by a refusal to remember" (Nobel 14). A poem must teach us how to read it while we read, so that we will know how to create that connection for ourselves, and thus carry the witness to the future.

Engaging the Word

It is difficult

to get the news from poems

yet men die miserably every day

for lack

of what is found there.

—William Carlos Williams,

from "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower"

In both his Nobel lecture and The Witness of Poetry, Czeslaw Milosz makes reference to his distant relative, the French poet Oscar Milosz, who lived and wrote around the turn of twentieth century. Oscar not only profoundly shaped Czeslaw's views of writing, but he also predicted the change in poetry during the twentieth century and beyond. Czeslaw explains his relative's view of twentieth-century poetry as having suffered an "impoverishment and narrowing' because its interests became limited to 'an aesthetic and nearly always individualistic order.' In other words, it withdrew from the domain common to all people and into the close circle of subjectivism' (Witness 26). Both the Miloszs proceed to denounce "one of the basic tenets of modern poets... the belief that true art cannot be understood by ordinary people" (Witness 27). While this elitistic characteristic of the Modern poets has faded, especially with the shift in American poetry during the 1950s, Czeslaw points out that the phenomenon is still current in the United States—the reader and writers of poetry inhabit college campuses, and are seemingly neither affected by or affecting the ordinary folks (30-1). Here is where American poetry, whether Buddhist or non-Buddhist, has room to become more socially engaged. The web that connects all of us under the Buddhist ideals of compassion and interbeing must reflect the self of American poetry and throw out connectors from here to the entire population. In the United States, poetry is still separate from politics despite Forché's poetry of witness. But by employing Buddhist concepts of non-duality, the American poetry scene might change for the better; and, in Milosz's words, "end [the] contradiction which opposes the poet's need for distance to his feeling of solidarity with his fellow humans" (Nobel 21). The poet's desire for distance should help her to make this connection with her fellow humans, not hinder the process, because there must be a balance of the two. Mindfulness will not start the change in American poetry; only a socially engaged action can do this, a
deliberate movement toward connecting American poetry with the American people, an eradication of the elitism that subconsciously creates an all-white, nearly all-male and nearly all-Zen-Buddhist, anthology on Buddhism in contemporary poetry—a move as deliberate and simple as that achieved in the silence-breaking publication of Premonitions. Perhaps American poetry is not in a conducive political or social situation to produce such powerfully evocative national poets as Pablo Neruda or Czeslaw Milosz. However, as shown through exploring the different ways to socially engage in Buddhism, connection is always a possibility, if not yet the reality it should be in American poetry.

Works Consulted


---. "Please Call Me By My True Names." Eppsteiner 31-40.


Qtd. in Hirshfield Web (152).

1 See such poets as Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, whose many socially engaged poetic acts have much relevance to this subject. I have attempted, however, to focus on poets less well-known as activists, and who are socially engaged, all the same.

2 The Witness of Poetry 108.

3 In Premonitions 553; I have chosen to include what I consider to be socially engaged poems in the Buddhist sense at the beginning of each section. If page numbers and time permitted, I would have analyzed specific poems from the critical stance of an engaged poetry, and incorporated the analyses as further support of my argument.

4 Nhat Hanh himself proves to be a connection between poetry and socially engaged Buddhism—in addition to having written many scholarly books, he has also published several volumes of poetry.

5 I realize that I might be over-simplifying Buddhist language philosophies. Zen Buddhism offers reams of scholastic work on the workings of language—yet I wanted simply to stress the interbeing aspect of language.

6 Facing the River 3.

7 Which is not a bad thing. Hirshfield notes that "[i]f the teachings of Buddhism arise out of a deep experience of concentration... surely 'Buddhist' realization is everywhere possible" (152).

8 "Introduction" 5.

9 The Lives of the Heart 108.