

Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies

ISSN 1710-8268

<https://thecjbs.org/>

Number 14, 2019

The Driftwood Shrine: Discovering Zen in American Poetry

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JOHN GENDO WOLFF, SENSEI, *The Driftwood Shrine: Discovering Zen in American Poetry*. Richmond Hill, Ontario: The Sumeru Press Inc., 2016. XXIII, 133 pp. CAN \$26.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-896559-28-5

The Driftwood Shrine by American poet, professor, and priest John Gendo Wolff, Sensei is a highly readable book of Buddhist teachings derived from a selection of twelve short poems by well-known American poets. The work draws from the teachings of Sōtō Zen, in which Wolff was trained and ordained through the lineage of the Japanese monk Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi, who went to America in the 1950s, and Wolff's own experiences. This short but intellectually demanding text braids literary hermeneutics, religious pedagogy, and autobiography in an effort to inspire Zen sympathizers and Zen practitioners (xvii). Beyond these confessional target audiences it will also serve as a useful undergraduate survey of the interaction between American poetry and Buddhism, as well as a rich primary source for scholars working in the field of Zen in contemporary North America.

Wolff's preface makes it clear that the book's guiding thrust is Zen doctrine: "Overall, *The Driftwood Shrine* has been structured to reflect the koan literature that has comprised the bulk of my training" (xv). He goes on to define koans ("public cases") as contemplative ritual tools designed to "model certain perspectives on Buddhist realization" (xv) in the Zen tradition, which are often buttressed by a preliminary contextualizing "pointer," a follow-up commentary, and a concluding poem "that summarizes the main spirit of the koan" (xv). The "koans" in this book are the twelve American poems to which Wolff provides his own pointer, commentarial essay, and distillatory concluding poem as part of his effort to illuminate the "mystical insight, the fundamental experience of Zen practice" (xvi) enshrined in each poem. The book's structure thus reflects the author's overarching argument that the selected American poems contain meditative insights frequently referred to simply as "Zen": "The Dharma

gleams in these poems in both subtle and profound ways” (xvii). These particular elements are proffered as the experiential basis of the Zen tradition.

Subsequent chapters showcase literary glimmers of American Dharma by making specific, compelling cases for the presence of definitive Zen lessons in each poem. The poems span 170 years, from the work of the relatively obscure evangelical Christian Transcendentalist Jones Very (d. 1880) to the recent Poet Laureate and practicing Zen Buddhist W. S. Merwin (b. 1927). Wolff does not claim that all his selected poets aimed to express the experiential essence of Zen. Rather, he describes their varying degrees of engagement with Buddhism (from unfamiliar to committed) before he imagines their words as revelatory forms of Zen scripture.

This fascinating hermeneutic is on fine display in his commentary to Ezra Pound’s famous two-line poem “In a Station of the Metro.” Following a tall prophecy in the chapter’s first paragraph—“Within the poem’s dark spaces, I believe, you too will find the gift of unborn Buddha nature” (35)—Wolff gets quite scientific in his structural phonetic analysis of Pound’s poem (36-38). Through discussions of Japanese folk literature and flower arranging, he then launches an impressive interpretation of the poem’s formal qualities as an expression of Buddhism’s holiest object of liberating gnosis, the inseparability of form and emptiness, or conventional and ultimate truth. Wolff explains, “By omitting every scrap of comforting explanation of his poem, Pound created an ‘empty’ space that allows the ‘faces in the crowd’ to be seen as they really are: as forms that arise from, and return to, the darkness, the unborn, the empty space that makes all experience an expression of perfect freedom” (40). Within this exegesis is a remarkably concise, concentric reflection on another Buddhist lesson—impermanence and the suffering of its denial—which glides gracefully from autobiographical anecdote to Pound’s poem to Zen pedagogy and back in a single page (41). Here is the author artfully employing

his professorial literary expertise to great effect in his religious role as Zen exegete.

Another memorable instance of Wolff's characteristic launch from literary criticism (e.g., biographical information or linguistic analysis) to hermeneutics (e.g., interpretive statements of religious meaning) opens his commentary to H. D.'s "Sea Rose" (78-79), which concludes as evocatively as the poem itself: "So the poem's closing question, 'Can the spice rose / drip such acrid fragrance / hardened in a leaf?' is the Zen shore that beckons us beyond our hothouse dreams" (79). Elsewhere, Wolff uses specific elements of a poem to frame strikingly vulnerable autobiographical anecdotes illustrating particular Zen insights within the seemingly profane, potentially sacred details of daily life, such as his buzzing refrigerator or itchy hands (48-49).

Perhaps by authorial design it is not easy to distinguish Wolff's evidence from his theory—whether he uses Zen teachings to illuminate American poetry or vice versa. Wolff's ordination teacher Susan Myoyu Andersen, Roshi offers a fitting assessment in her back-cover testimonial: "Through a two way mirror, American poetry and Zen mutually illuminate." As his preface suggests, however, Wolff's reflections are derived from his own lineage rather than concrete evidence in the selection of American poems. Wolff uses the teachings of a Japanese-American Zen tradition as a means to discern and "illuminate" those very teachings in Zen and non-Zen literature. In this respect, he is very clearly seeing what he wants to see in the poems.

The complex relationship between Wolff's Zen commentaries and the diversity of texts from which they are derived (between his arguments and evidence, so to speak) highlights the most innovative and tendentious characteristic of the book: Wolff's construction of non-Zen literature as Zen scripture through a creative religious hermeneutic (sectarian and

subjective) by which he purports to be “discovering Zen in American poetry.”

Pound, for example, was directly influenced by the aesthetics of Japanese Zen-inspired haiku poetry but was by no means a practicing Buddhist (Wolff points out that Confucianism was a greater ideological influence). In Wolff’s hands Pound becomes a veritable Zen master who “(perhaps unwittingly) imported centuries of Zen experience to the tradition of western poetry” (37) when he substituted a semicolon for a colon in the second edition of “In a Station of the Metro”—a poem which now proffers qualified commentary to the *Heart Sutra*, one of the most well-known Mahāyāna scriptures (42). In his broader account of Buddhism’s influence on early twentieth century Imagists (e.g., Pound and H. D.), the study of Asian poetic forms led them to “[graft] certain ‘Zen’ perspectives onto their writing, almost without their knowing it” (78). On the basis of cultural relativism, constructivist religious scholars may find problematic Wolff’s suggestion that Pound could unwittingly enshrine the essence of Zen experience in his work. In particular, the fact that Pound (and the other poets) could transmit “Zen experience” with minimal influence from Zen is unsubstantiated.

David McMahan’s survey of “a few stretches on the path whereby *Zen* came to be thought of in the West as a free-floating state of being, rather than as a concrete, historical tradition shaped by years of reflection and practice”¹ suggests that Wolff’s universalization of Zen experience participates in an established American tradition of Zen. In particular, his work is reminiscent of D. T. Suzuki’s hugely successful mid-twentieth-century efforts “to extrapolate the essence of Zen from Zen Buddhism as a

¹ David McMahan, “Repackaging Zen for the West,” in *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*, eds. Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 219.

religion” in order to selectively repackage it for culturally disenchanted Anglo-Americans as “the pure experience of unmediated encounter with reality.”²

At times the author is careful to point out that his exegesis of the Zen-as-mystical-experience in the literature emerges from a particular sect of Japanese Buddhism (e.g.: 43-44, 52, 56). Less acknowledged is the fact that the selected poets were not intending to inspire a “Zen experience” as their ultimate goal. In fact, the poets were directly influenced by non-Zen religious traditions such as Allen Ginsberg’s interpretation of Tibetan Buddhism (which has privileged a gradualist approach to enlightenment over Chinese Zen subitism), Hinduism (which may have had a greater influence on Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson compared with Buddhism), or Christianity (which certainly had a greater influence on Jones Very and T. S. Eliot).

In an academic journal or a public classroom, Wolff’s reading of Emily Dickinson’s “280” (“I felt a Funeral”) as “a marvellous depiction of the development of meditative concentration, or *samadhi*” (24) would need to be identified as one of many plausible readings and as sectarian. Outside a religious pedagogical context, the “Zen” of Dickinson’s poem should be acknowledged as interpreted rather than discovered or definitive. Wolff’s insights are not derived from a self-evident mystical experience. Rather, they arise from his culturally and historically situated sect of Buddhism. According to Wolff, “even if [Dickinson] had no formal knowledge of meditative techniques, she nevertheless had the time and space, the quietude and the will of imagination, to turn her light inward and partake of the daily bread of Zen” (24). This fairly unexceptional claim at once imagines a *sui generis* Zen experience that exists prior to and has

² McMahan, “Repackaging Zen,” 221.

no need for Zen tradition or training, while suggesting that just such tradition-bound training is needed to discern and to extract the Zen meaning from Dickinson's poem.

If Pound, H. D., and Dickinson were untrained, unwitting Zen adepts, then Wolff is the highly trained adept qualified to give them authority. As such, I often felt that it was Wolff more than his selected poets who "enshrined the gentle light of the Buddha's teaching in their work" (back cover). Wolff implicitly constructs himself as a sect-authorized Zen master, a roshi of the White Plum Asanga, capable of "discovering" and describing the Zen insights in the ideologically diverse selection of poems. Consequently, Zen influenced and non-Zen influenced poets are artificially deemed as sectarian Zen masters.

In his preface Wolff praises the poems for their natural, versus discursive, religiosity: "[N]one of the poems ... stridently promulgate 'Zen ideas.' They do not cheaply cash in on Buddhist imagery or come off as polemical, preachy, or didactic. . . . [they] naturally and organically *embody*, rather than vainly trumpet, the nature of spiritual practice and inquiry" (xvi). In order to harness these poems as Zen koans, however, Wolff assumes the role of didactic preacher promulgating Zen ideas. There is no third-party, scholarly "they," only the author's instructive "I" and the reader's presumably thirsty "you" —a pronoun structure which reflects and reproduces the normative Zen relationship between teacher and disciple. This is evident in the following examples: "What I'm telling you is that . . ." (42); "Now, thinking this over, tell me . . ." (105); "I'll make you a deal. If you can show me a self that is fixed, enduring, changeless, and particular to you, then by all means keep your hope. But if you *can't* show me this self, then give up your hope that you can keep it alive forever" (61).

Wolff's assumption of the role of the wise teacher (and of his reader's role as faithful student) is not surprising in light of his stated aim

to promote Zen practice. This is, after all, a religious text that aims to help the reader discern patterns of delusion in their own life and to chart a contemplative path of “course correction” (Ch. 1 title). Read within such a faith-informed pedagogical framework, this book may very well help Zen sympathizers and practitioners wake up from the suffering dream of “self-clinging” (124) to the realization that Nirvāṇa is Saṃsāra and Saṃsāra is Nirvāṇa (122-123). Even without such a framework I had no trouble seeing my own neuroses insightfully diagnosed in Wolff’s anecdotal teachings about the nature of attachment (e.g., 5-7) and aversion (e.g., 48-49).

In summary, two ideological commitments tacitly undergird the book’s mission to inspire and deepen readers’ experience of Zen: the author’s admiring belief in the *selected poems*’ “Zen” wisdom (itself enabled and informed by Wolff’s faith relationship to his Zen lineage and practice) and the reader’s admiring belief in Wolff’s “Zen” wisdom. Without such a faith relationship to Wolff and his teaching lineage, or perhaps some *zazen* experience of one’s own, it is difficult to explore or validate his religious claims; for example, that the “dark spaces” in Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” proffer “the gift of unborn Buddha nature” (35).

Wolff points out that its unique koan structure and use of non-koans as koans make his work “the first full-length book of Dharma teachings to use poems in this way” (xvi). His innovative use of non-Zen texts as pedagogical training texts which are ritually deployable within Sōtō Zen may be as controversial for Sōtō traditionalists as it is compelling for modernists. Wolff holds up to an enduring conviction that mystical experiences transcend cultural differences. Although Wolff’s application of a non-sectarian religious hermeneutic is radical, the limitless number of literary texts that could potentially thereby serve as Zen contemplative aids represents his greatest contribution to the disciplines of literary criticism and Buddhist theology.

An intriguing religious implication of this creative canonization method is the possibility that *any* poem—indeed any *object*, “a broom, a coffee cup, a window box full of weeds” (xii)—might be legitimately enshrined and productively read with such an expansive Zen hermeneutic. While constructivist scholars of literature and religion may have a critical field-day wading through the empirical issues with such readings,³ practitioners of Zen may as eagerly follow Wolff and his successors to the non-discursive project of *zazen*, just as Whitman (whose free verse concludes the book) turned from the sweating linguists and contenders of his day to witness and to wait on the grass.⁴

A belief among members of Calgary’s Avatamsaka Monastery (affiliated with the Dharma Realm Buddhist Association) “that the Rocky Mountains were *already* a Buddhist sacred site awaiting the arrival of Master Hua to actualize its potential”⁵ recently led Lina Verchery to theorize transnational Buddhist gurus’ ritual inscription of “latent Buddhism”⁶ onto new geographical and cultural mission fields. In a somewhat analogous form of Mahayana ‘skillful means’ (*upāya-kauśalya*), John Gendo Wolff, Roshi’s *Driftwood Shrine* contributes quite concretely to the growth of a uniquely American tradition of Zen. He ritually inscribes latent Zen teachings and practices onto a selection of acclaimed American poems,

³ Deconstructionist literary theorists would likely defend Wolff’s hermeneutic. For instance, supporters of Roland Barthes’ famous 1967 “death of the author” stance may argue that a literary work and its creator have no essential relationship, a position with implications bearing some philosophical affinity to the Buddhist doctrine of emptiness (e.g., that discovering is tantamount to imagining).

⁴ Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” in *Leaves of Grass* (London: George G. Harrap & Co. Ltd., 1915), 28.

⁵ Lina Verchery, “The Avatamsaka Sagely Monastery and New Perspectives on Globalized Buddhism in Canada,” in *Understanding the Consecrated Life in Canada: Critical Essays on Contemporary Trends*, ed. Jason Zuidema (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2015), 372.

⁶ Verchery, “Sagely Monastery.”

and onto the landscape of the author's native Midwest in the process (e.g., 46, 50). In this notable offering to the syncretistic development of American literature and American Zen, Wolff has produced a variegated shrine to both traditions, which invites their constructive coalescence within the contemplative praxes of Zen Buddhists and tourists.