



A CELEBRATION OF THE WILD

On Earth Democracy and the Ethics of Civil Disobedience in Gary Snyder's Writing

*To carry yourself forward and experience myriad things is delusion.
But myriad things coming forth and experiencing themselves
is awakening.*

Dōgen

*Cultivating a sense of the whole functions to place each individual
part in greater and more coherent perspective, and thus to trans-
form one's experience of what is present and at hand.*

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THE WILD OR MOUNTAINS AND WATERS?

The article attempts to show the evolution of Gary Snyder's "mountains-and-rivers" philosophy of living/writing (from the Buddhist anarchism of the 1960s to his peace-promoting practice of the Wild), and focuses on the link between the ethics of civil disobedience, deep ecology, and deep "mind-ecology." Jason M. Wirth's seminal study titled *Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth: Reading Gary Snyder and Dōgen in an Age of Ecological Crisis*¹

1. Wirth's study is one of the most recent books that show Snyder's importance in the history of ecological thought, the so-called "green studies," geopoetic practices, and, more importantly, comparative religious studies. Other publications which foreground Snyder's relevance include (in choosing the texts, I focus on the ones which promote a comparative perspective of ecological and religious discourse): *Buddhism and Ecology. The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds* (1997), *Deep Ecology and World Religions. New*

provides an interesting point of reference. Wirth discusses what Dōgen calls “the Great Earth” and what Snyder calls “the Wild” as a peculiar play of waters and mountains, emptiness and form; he is interested in exploring the ways in which these ideas can illuminate the spiritual and ethical dimensions of place, with a particular stress on Earth’s democracy, a place-based sense of communion where all beings inter-are. In my reading of Snyder’s work, I place emphasis on Snyder’s philosophical fascination with Taoism as well as Ch’an and Zen Buddhism, and I try to show how these philosophical traditions inform Snyder’s mind-traveling which, in turn exerts influence on his writing-living practice.²

Snyder is primarily interested in exploring a sense of connection between self and Self, and between self and Nature; it is important to note that his exploration is not focused on intellectual peregrinations—although that aspect of the whole dynamics is crucial—but first and foremost on developing a deep spiritual and sensual contact with the Great Earth. This process is inextricably linked with exploring the Wild, understood as wild nature, but also as the wild within. Embracing wildness within and without in Snyder’s philosophy of being means breaking free from the captivity of our ego, and opening up to what we truly are:

In early Chinese Daoism “training” did not mean to cultivate the wildness out of oneself, but to do away with arbitrary and delusive conditioning. Zhuang-zi [Chuang Tzu–MK] seems to be saying that all social values are false and generate self-serving ego. Buddhism takes a middle path—allowing that greed, hatred, and ignorance are intrinsic to ego, but that ego itself is a reflex of ignorance and delusion that comes from not seeing who we “truly” are. (Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* 99)

Essays on Sacred Ground (2001), *A Place for Wayfaring. The Poetry and Prose of Gary Snyder* (2000) and *Literature, Nature, and Other* (1995). There are two anthologies that should be mentioned here as well: *At Home on the Earth. Becoming Native to Our Place* (1999), and *A Place on Earth. An Anthology of Nature Writing from Australia and North America* (2003).

2. It would be interesting to discuss the evolution of Snyder’s views in the contexts of the current environmental politics and the ecological engagement of the younger generation, globally. It goes without saying that many issues raised in Snyder’s writing are very much ad rem to the ecological/environmental political discourse and activism of today, and his relevance should be foregrounded here, but the scope of this article does not allow me to explore these highly engaging interconnections.

Snyder adds that each individual decides whether or not s/he “makes a little private vow to work for compassion and insight or overlooks this possibility” (*Practice of the Wild* 99). What seems crucial here is that the natural consequence of the vow should be practice: “a training that helps us realize our own true nature, and nature” (*Practice of the Wild* 99).

When discussing the importance of day-to-day practice, Snyder often refers to Dōgen (1200–1253), his favourite Japanese philosopher and poet. Apart from being one of the most renowned masters of Sōtō Zen, Dōgen was a mountain-lover, and this passion for mountain climbing is something extraordinarily attractive for Snyder, who makes frequent references to Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* (*The Eye and Treasury of the True Law*), both in his essays and poetry. One could argue—as many critics have—that there are more mental affinities between Snyder and Dōgen. In his article tellingly titled “Painting Mountains and Rivers: Gary Snyder, Dōgen, and the Elemental Sūtra of the Wild,” Wirth argues that Snyder’s compelling language, which goes beyond the duality of art and science/philosophy, speaks of “our elemental relationship to the earth (what he calls ‘the wild’ and, following Dōgen, the Chinese landscape tradition, and many classic Ch’an and Taoist practitioners, ‘mountains and rivers’)” (Wirth 243). In my article, I try to show how these seemingly distant perspectives of looking at “the wild” coalesce or converge in Snyder’s work.

The following passage comes from Snyder’s essay on Dōgen’s “Mountains and Waters Sūtra.” Interestingly, the opening paragraph in Snyder’s essay is also the opening paragraph in Dōgen’s sūtra:

The mountains and rivers of this moment are the actualization of the way of the ancient Buddhas. Each, abiding in its own phenomenal expression, realizes completeness. Because mountains and waters have been active since before the eon of emptiness, they are alive at this moment. Because they have been the self since before form arose, they are liberated and realized. (qtd. in Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* 104)

The image of “mountains and rivers” and their movement (“The blue mountains are constantly walking”)—as well as the theme of liberation and self-realization—will reappear as a refrain in subsequent parts of the essay. It is important to note here the intertextual nature of the quote: throughout his essay, Snyder is using a quote

within a quote: he quotes Dōgen, and Dōgen quotes the Ch'an master Furong. One could argue that the multi-level intertextual coherence in Snyder's work is something he shares with classical Chinese and Japanese writers.

Snyder uses the quote within a quote to discuss the process of going beyond the duality of being and non-being to arrive at what he calls "the nature of the nature of the nature" and "the wild in wild," both of which stand for "thusness":

Dōgen is not concerned with "sacred mountains"—or pilgrimages, or spirit allies, or wilderness as some special quality. His mountains and streams are the processes of this earth, all of existence, process, essence, action, absence; they roll being and nonbeing together. They are what we are, we are what they are. For those who would see directly into essential nature, the idea of the sacred is a delusion and an obstruction: it diverts us from seeing what is before our eyes: plain thusness. Roots, stems, and branches are all equally scratchy. No hierarchy, no equality. No occult and exoteric, no gifted kids and slow achievers. No wild and tame, no bound or free, no natural and artificial. Each totally its own frail self. Even though connected all which ways; even *because* connected all which ways. [...] This, *thusness*, is the nature of the nature of nature. The wild in wild. (Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild* 110)

In David Hinton's view, this passage about Dōgen's "Mountains and Rivers Sūtra" summarizes Snyder's philosophical interests (*The Wilds of Poetry* 135). Hinton notices that Dōgen's "mountains and rivers" is "the Chinese (and later, Japanese) term relegated to 'landscape' in translation, as in 'landscape painting' or 'landscape poetry,' but in Snyder's description is indistinguishable from Tao, that ontological tissue in constant transformation" (*The Wilds of Poetry* 135). For Hinton, Snyder's "thusness" is "essentially *tzu-jan* (a concept that appears in Snyder's essays): Tao seen as the ten thousand individual things we encounter in *contact*" (*The Wilds of Poetry* 135). Snyder quotes Dōgen who says "When you forget the self, you become one with the ten thousand things" (*The Practice of the Wild* 160), and he adds: "ten thousand things means all of the phenomenal world. When we are open that world can occupy us" (*The Practice of the Wild* 160). Snyder's *tzu-jan*—a concept from Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu which literally means "self-so" or "the of-itself" or "being such of itself" and thus "spontaneous" or "natural" (Hinton, *Chuang Tzu* 8)—is linked with the practice

of *wu-wei* (selfless action; literally: “nothing doing” [Hinton, *Chuang Tzu* 8]) and his practice of the wild.

One could only add that the concept appears not only in Snyder’s essays, but also in his poetry, most notably in his *Mountains and Waters Without End*. I mention this particular (epic) poem as it can be seen as the most elaborate embodiment as it were of Snyder’s “mountains-and-rivers cosmology,” a cosmology which, as Hinton aptly notices, draws primarily from non-Western sources, above all from Ch’an Buddhism (*The Wilds of Poetry* 135), Taoist thought (Ch’an’s conceptual source), and classical Chinese poetry. Obviously, we must remember that *Mountains and Waters Without End* is also an exercise in intersemiotic translation; it “writes-through” as if it were a *shan-shui* horizontal hand scroll called *Mountains and Waters Without End* by an unknown artist of the Sung dynasty. If, as Wirth notes, *shan-shui* (landscape) paintings “are not *representations* of mountains, waters, skies, and minimized humans and their dwellings” but rather “elemental exercises of the imagination” (Wirth, *Painting Mountains* 242), then it is not surprising that Snyder himself refers to Ch’an Buddhist landscape painting as a meditative exercise, and compares it with the role of the *tankas* and mandalas in Tibetan Buddhism (Snyder, *Mountains* 156). *The Practice of the Wild* contains a similar passage: “If a scroll is taken as a kind of Chinese mandala, then all the characters in it are our various little selves, and the cliffs, trees, waterfalls, and clouds are our own changes and stations” (115). Similarly, as Wirth notes, “the practice of reading transforms into its own meditative practice of the Wild” (*Mountains* 34): “Clearing the mind and sliding in / to that created space / a web of waters streaming over rocks” (Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers* 5). Julia Martin follows Snyder’s argument and writes: “If *Mountains and Rivers* is a sūtra, then its teaching is the communication of such a mandala” (“Seeing a Corner in the Sky” 80). If we want to see the poem as a sūtra, then its teaching will be inextricably linked with its structure, with its design. This is how we come closer to one more source of inspiration in writing the poem: Japanese Nō tradition. In an interview with John Jacoby, Snyder discusses the Japanese Nō play (Zeami’s *Yamamba*), and he admits that it is certainly a key structural sense of the poem, “with the scroll itself an analogous

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structuring moving across the landscape, moving through different realms, moving through different seasons, but coming to a kind of ambiguous end sometimes” (Snyder, *The Real Work* 50). Again, even though he does not say it openly, Snyder suggests that part of the message he tries to convey is manifested through the structure of the poem, through techniques he became familiar with while living in Kyoto³. The ambiguity he mentions might be understood as the application of one of the most important aesthetic categories in Japanese Nō drama, namely *yūgen* (profound mystery). Here is what Alan Watts, Snyder’s mentor and friend, has to say about this and other moods:

Where the mood of the moment is solitary and quiet it is called *sabi*. When the artist is feeling depressed or sad, and in this peculiar emptiness of feeling catches a glimpse of something rather ordinary and unpretentious in its incredible “suchness,” the mood is called *wabi*. When the moment evokes a more intense, nostalgic sadness, connected with autumn and the vanishing away of the world, it is called *aware*. And when the vision is the sudden perception of something mysterious and strange, hinting at an unknown never to be discovered, the mood is called *yūgen*. These extremely untranslatable Japanese words denote the four basic moods of *furyu*, that is, of the general atmosphere of Zen “taste” in its perception of the aimless moments of life. (Watts 198)

In his seminal *Zen and Japanese Culture*, D.T. Suzuki notices that all art has its mystery, its spiritual rhythm, its *myō*, as the Japanese would call it: “the true artist, like a Zen master, is one who knows how to appreciate the *myō* of things” (220). In Japanese literature, *myō* is sometimes referred to as *yūgen*. For Suzuki,

3. Although his main reason for being in Kyoto was to practice Zen Buddhism, Snyder managed to make contact with Yamabushi, the Mountain Buddhist, and had a chance to experience how “walking the landscape can become both ritual and meditation” (Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers Without End* 158). Yamabushi follow the Shugendō doctrine, a peculiar integration of esoteric Buddhism of the Shingon sect, with Tendai Buddhism, Taoism, and even elements of Shinto—the traditions Snyder finds inspiring. In his essay “Blue Mountains Constantly Walking” Snyder speaks at length about his experience of walking the ancient pilgrimage route of the Ōmine Yamabushi, of walking landscape as a mandala; he mentions a traditional center of the “Diamond-Realm Mandala” at the summit of Mt. Ōmine and the center of the “Womb-Realm Mandala” at the Kumano Shrine (*The Practice of the Wild* 106–107).

all great works of art embody in them *yūgen* “whereby we attain a glimpse of things eternal in the world of constant changes: that is we look into the secrets of Reality” (1959: 220). This philosophy of writing can be seen as part of Snyder’s philosophy of the wild.

“WILD” AT HEART

In 1961, Gary Snyder wrote a thought-provoking article called “Buddhist Anarchism.” Its revised version was published in the 1968 collection *Earth, House, Hold* under the title “Buddhism and the Coming Revolution.” In it, Snyder says, “[T]he mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self / void. We need both” (92), and he adds that they are “both contained in the traditional three aspects of the Dharma path: wisdom (*prajña*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and morality (*śīla*)” (92). For Snyder, morality means practicing wisdom and meditation through personal example and responsible action for the benefit of “the true community (*sangha*) of ‘all beings’” (92). This last aspect means, for him:

supporting any cultural and economic revolution that moves clearly toward a free, international, classless world. It means using such means as civil disobedience, outspoken criticism, protest, pacifism, voluntary poverty and even gentle violence if it comes to a matter of restraining some impetuous redneck. It means affirming the widest possible spectrum of non-harmful individual behavior—defending the right of individuals to smoke hemp, eat peyote, be polygynous, polyandrous or homosexual. Worlds of behavior and custom long banned by the Judeo-Capitalist-Christian-Marxist West. (Snyder, *Earth, House, Hold* 92)

It is interesting to note that Snyder connects the practice of meditation with the process of changing the world; the “coming revolution” he describes, and which he embodies, is a revolution of what the Japanese call *kokoro*: the heart-mind:

The traditional cultures are in any case doomed, and rather than cling to their good aspects hopelessly it should be remembered that whatever is or ever was in any other culture can be reconstructed from the unconscious, through meditation. In fact, it is my own view that the coming revolution will close the circle and link us in many ways with the most creative aspects of our archaic past. If we are lucky we may eventually arrive at a totally integrated world culture with matrilineal descent,

free-form marriage, natural-credit communist economy, less industry, far less population and lots more national parks. (Snyder, *Earth, House, Hold* 92–93)

A similar message can be found in a poem tellingly titled “Revolution in the Revolution in the Revolution” from *Regarding Wave* (1970) where Snyder refers to various forms of captivity, “or dictatorship of the Unconscious” as he calls it; when our minds are free, he says, when we realize our true (wild?) nature, we can finally “arrive at true Communism” (*Regarding Wave* 39). “From he masses to the masses’ the most / Revolutionary consciousness is to be found / Among the most ruthlessly exploited classes: Animals, trees, water, air, grasses” (*Regarding Wave* 39). In each subsequent stanza, Snyder provides a different context in which the process of self-realization takes place. Hence, we might speak of three different images of a captive mind, but, interestingly, in all three cases the power to break free from oppression lies (hidden) in the seed-syllables of mantras:

If the capitalists and imperialists
are the exploiters, the masses are the workers.
and the party
is the communist.

If civilization
is the exploiter, the masses is nature.
and the party
is the poets.

If the abstract rational intellect
is the exploiter, the masses is the unconscious.
and the party
is the yogins.

⋈ POWER
comes out of the seed-syllables of mantras. (Snyder, *Regarding Wave* 39)

In 1980, in a collection titled *The Real Work: Interviews and Talks 1964–1979*, viewed by many critics as an application of the *Earth House Hold* theory, Snyder’s focus is on the living out of that process. The praxis is difficult, he says: “[i]t’s a much greater challenge to learn, finally, how to apply our contemporary scientific inclination to refine our biological understandings” (149), and he adds that we should “learn to work with biology rather than to clumsily recon-

struct it with nuts and bolts” (149). “In a nutshell,” he continues, “our future options are technocratic solutions or sophisticated biological solutions. The second, of course, is obviously right” (149). In a collection of essays titled *The Old Ways* (1977), Snyder once again stresses the importance of the link between the biological-ecological awareness and self-awareness in a spiritual sense: “The biological-ecological sciences have been laying out (implicitly) a spiritual dimension [...]. We must incorporate that insight into our own personal spiritual quest and integrate it with all the wisdom teachings we have received from the nearer past” (63).

In a letter in response to a question from the Dear Poets Commune, Snyder openly admits: “I became a poet that I might give voice to the songs I heard in nature and my inner ear, and that also, by the power of song, I might contribute to the downfall of the technological industrial world, its total destruction, in favor of a world based on closer knowledge of nature in man himself” (qtd. in Murphy, *A Place for Wayfaring* 10). The last sentence suggests that knowledge of nature is related to knowledge of the self, and self-realization is partly related to being in harmony with nature. We can see how this process operates by looking at “Tomorrow’s Song” from *Turtle Island* (1974) where Snyder affirms his vision of civil disobedience, of working outside the system, “getting power from within” and “growing strong on less”:

The USA slowly lost its mandate
in the middle and later twentieth century
it never gave the mountains and rivers,
trees and animals,
a vote.
all the people turned away from it
myths die; even continents are impermanent

Turtle Island returned. [...]

We look to the future with pleasure
we need no fossil fuel
get power within
grow strong on less.

Grasp the tools and move in rhythm side by side
flash gleams of wit and silent knowledge
eye to eye
sit still like cats or snakes or stones

as whole and holding as
the blue black sky.
gentle and innocent as wolves
as tricky as a prince.

At work and in our place:

*in the service
of the wilderness
of life
of death
of the Mother's breasts!* (Snyder, *Turtle Island* 77)⁴

It is important to notice the song-like emphasis (similar to those in “Little Songs for Gaia” from *Axe Handles* (1983)) on being “in service / of the wilderness” in the place of one’s dwelling. Such an attitude, characterized by a mindful embracing of the wild as well as peace-promoting activism, can be seen not only in Snyder’s poetry or essays, but also in his engagement in various social and environmental initiatives. For instance, it is not surprising that when in 1978 Robert Aitken Roshi, Anne Hopkins Aitken, and Nelson Foster established The Buddhist Peace Fellowship—the first organizational flower of socially engaged Buddhism here in the West, a grass roots movement promoting various forms of nonviolent social activism and environmentalism, Snyder joined. On the website of the movement, which as a matter of fact is still active in its endeavors, we read that “the spark for BPF flew from Robert Aitken Roshi’s in-depth study of 19th and 20th century anarchism and his long experience as an anti-war and anti-military activist.” They must have shared many convictions with Snyder. Joanna Macy, Jack Kornfield, Al Bloom, and many others who soon joined the movement. It should be noted here how significant

4. This poem is one of the most well-known manifestos foregrounding the importance of the interrelated character of the ecological/environmental political discourse and activism. If we wanted to refer to the poem which marked the beginning of Snyder’s poetic/environmental activism we would need to move back in time to The Six Gallery Reading, an important poetry event that took place on October 7, 1955 in San Francisco. It was at this reading that Allen Ginsberg first read his poem *Howl*, and Gary Snyder presented his poem “A Berry Feast.” As Michael McClure puts it in one of the interviews in *The Practice of the Wild* film, it was clearly the first manifesto of Snyder’s environmental activism.

the collaboration of practicing Buddhists, social activists, proponents of deep ecology, and last but not least, mindfulness was and still is for Western culture. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship itself emerged as a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, an interfaith umbrella of nonviolent peace and justice organizations, which takes inspiration from Jesus, Gandhi, Thomas Merton, and Martin Luther King Jr. The history of the BPF is inextricably linked with the continuing influence of Thich Nhat Hanh. In 1983, BPF and the San Francisco Zen Center organized Thich Nhat Hanh's first retreat for Western Buddhists at Tassajara, and in 1985, 1987, and 1989 BPF co-sponsored him for longer tours and in larger venues. On the website of the movement we read that the BPF community still continues to learn from Thich Nhat Hanh and benefits "from the thousands of people who come to engaged Dharma practice through his teaching." They also quote from Hanh's article "The Order of Interbeing," which contains the core of his teaching:

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To be in touch with the reality of the world means to be in touch with everything that is around us in the animal, vegetal, and mineral realms. If we want to be in touch, we have to get out of our shell and look clearly and deeply at the wonders of life—the snowflakes, the moonlight, the songs of the birds, the beautiful flowers—and also the suffering—hunger, disease, torture, and oppression. Overflowing with understanding and compassion, we can appreciate the wonders of life, and, at the same time, act with firm resolve to alleviate the suffering. Too many people distinguish between the inner world of our mind and the world outside, but these worlds are not separate. They belong to the same reality. (Hanh 205–206)

In this passage, Hanh is explaining the philosophy of the *Tiep Hien* Order. *Tiep* means "being in touch with" and "continuing"; *hien* means "realizing" and "making it here and now" (Hanh 205). In order to inter-be, to use one of Hanh's favorite verbs, we need to "bring and express our insights into real life" (Hanh 206). And, as only "the present moment is real and available to us" (Hanh 206), understanding and compassion must be seen and touched in this very moment. Hanh stresses that "[t]he secret of Buddhism is to be awake here and now. There is no way to peace; peace is the way. There is no way to enlightenment; enlightenment is the way. There is no way to liberation; liberation is the way (207)." It seems that Hanh's teaching is very close to Snyder's *tzu-jan*

and his practice of the Wild: mindful affirmation of the moment, being open to what happens, being ready to welcome any obstacles, being *in contact*. Below is a poem from his recent collection titled *This Present Moment* which exemplifies Snyder's wildness at heart:

Askesis, Praxis, Theōria of the Wild

The shining way of the wild

–its *theōria*

is, that the world is unrelenting, brief, and often painful

and its *askesis*,

cold, hunger, stupid mistakes, bitterness, delusions, loneliness;

hard nights and days are unavoidable

to find the *praxis* is to

hang in, work it out, watch for the moment,

coiled and gazing, the shining way of the wild

from before, ⚭ 4.IX.94 (Snyder, This Present Moment 60)

Jonathan Stalling in his book titled *Poetics of Emptiness. Transformations of Asian Thought in American Poetry* devotes one chapter to Gary Snyder, and he notes that Snyder often chooses “to end poems on figures of generative, all-encompassing emptiness that activate a grammar of relationships (that works backward) between various elements of the poem” (111). He calls this phenomenon “a retroactive grammar of unifying emptiness” (111). We may notice that in “*Askesis, Praxis, Theōria of the Wild*” we encounter a similar process in operation. Even the poem's typography points to a seemingly rhizomatic whole; the emptinesses are precisely what connects the *theōria*, *askesis* and *praxis* of the wild. I would also argue that the mysterious quality of the way's “shining” might be linked with the vision of Indra's net which I'm going to discuss in a moment.

In looking for an English word or phrase that would express the meaning of Tiep Hien, the word “interbeing” has been proposed (Hanh 207). As we learn, it is a translation of a Chinese term found in the teaching of the *Hua-yen Sūtra (Avatamsaka Sūtra)*. The sūtra has been translated into English by Thomas Cleary who calls it “the richest and most grandiose of all Buddhist scriptures” (1). To him, the sūtra's “incredible wealth of sensual imagery stag-

gers the imagination and exercises an almost mesmeric effect on the mind as it conveys a wide range of teachings through its complex structure, its colorful symbolism, and its mnemonic concentration formulae" (1). Is there any link between *Hua-yen Sūtra* and Snyder's writing? In a highly engaging collection of articles *The Sense of the Whole* devoted to the reading of Snyder's *Mountains and Rivers without End*, one of the chapters opens with a quotation from Snyder's *Practice of the Wild*: "To know the spirit of a place is to realize that you are a part of a part and that the whole is made up of parts, each of which is whole. You start with the part you are whole in" (41). Mark Goneremann, the editor of the book, argues that it is one of numerous instances that prove that at the heart of Snyder's writing we find the metaphor of Indra's net. This is precisely where Thich Nhat Hanh's "interbeing" connects with the metaphor of Indra's net and *Hua-yen Sūtra*.

In his illuminating book entitled *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra*, Francis H. Cook provides the following description, calling it the favorite Hua-yen method of exemplifying the manner in which things exist:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each "eye" of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring. The Hua-yen school has been fond of this image, because it symbolizes a cosmos in which there is an infinitely repeated interrelationship among all the members of the cosmos. This relationship is said to be one of simultaneous *mutual identity* and *mutual intercausality*. (2)

In the Hua-yen universe there is no hierarchy, there is no center, or perhaps, as Cook notes, "if there is one, it is everywhere," and he adds: "Man certainly is not the center, nor is some god" (4). In Buddhist philosophy, which is so important in Snyder's life and writing, Indra's net is a symbol of the interconnectedness

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of all reality. In his description of the Hua-yen school of Buddhism, Cook observes that the Chinese have a saying: “Hua-yen for philosophy, Ch’an for practice,” which, in his view shows the interrelationship of the two (26). Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki places particular importance on the relationship between Hua-yen and Zen, and he notes that “the philosophy of Zen is Kegon (*Avatamsaka* [*Hua-yen Sūtra*]) and the teaching of Kegon bears its fruit in the life of Zen” (qtd. in Dumoulin 46). Cook adds that without the practice and realization of Zen, Hua-yen philosophy “remains mere intellectual fun, never a vibrant reality” (26).

It is not surprising that Hua-yen images and ideas run throughout Snyder’s work, especially when one remembers that his formal Buddhist education took place in a Rinzai Zen seminary in Kyoto and that the founder of that order⁵ was indebted to this school. In his “Japan First Time Around,” written between 1956–1957, Snyder begins to discover diverse links between Zen, Hua-yen and Ch’an Buddhism. He also discovers associations between classical Chinese philosophy, painting and poetry (by which he has been drawn to throughout his studies) and Zen philosophy and poetry, especially in Dōgen’s writing. It could be argued that Dōgen becomes a perfect link between Zen and Ch’an traditions; his deep knowledge of Chinese philosophical traditions (various schools of Ch’an Buddhism and Taoism) becomes visible in the way he discusses the relation between the process of self-realization and being one with Nature, which is something Snyder finds very inspiring. He speaks about it openly in *The Practice of the Wild* (104–105).

Here is what Snyder writes about Zen and Hua-yen in his “Japan First Time Around” in June 1956:

So, Zen being founded on *Avatamsaka*, and the net-network of things; and Tantra being the application of the “interaction with no obstacles” vision on a personal-human level—the “other” becomes the lover, through whom the various links in the net can be perceived. As Zen goes to anything direct—rock or bushes or people—the Zen Master’s presence is to help one keep attention undivided, to always look one step farther along, to simplify the mind: like a blade which sharpens to nothing. (*Earth House Hold* 34)

5. Lin-chi (d. 867), one of the most influential of the T’ang period Ch’an masters.

For Snyder, as I will argue here, discovering the vibrant reality of Indra's net—or the “shining way of the wild”—begins only when poetry, thought and science come together, in a climate of reciprocal inspiration. In the poem “For All” from *Axe Handles* (1983) Snyder writes:

I pledge allegiance to the soil
 of Turtle Island,
 and to the beings who thereon dwell
 one ecosystem
 in diversity
 under the sun
 With joyful penetration for all. (114)

As Jason Wirth exclaims in the conclusion to his book, what we are talking about here is “one great sangha with all of its bioregions each in itself an interpenetrating jewel of Indra!” (*Mountains* 115). In *Mountains and Rivers without End*, the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is quoted only once. At the start of “With This Flesh” we read:

*“Why should we cherish all sentient beings?
 Because sentient beings
 are the roots of the tree-of-awakening.
 The Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas are the flowers and fruits.
 Compassion is the water for the roots.”* (Snyder 77)

But as Mark Gonnerman notices, Hua-yen images and ideas are woven throughout (9). He adds that the vision of *Avatamsaka* in *Mountains and Rivers without End* is “predicated on the notion of Emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the keynote of all Buddhist understanding” (9). It is also suggested by one of the two epigraphs which open the book, namely, Milarepa's “The notion of Emptiness engenders compassion” (the other quote comes from Dōgen's “Painting of a Rice Cake”).

Robin Robertson makes an observation that the message of Indra's net for us as individuals is that “each of us, through our own process of growth and transformation, affects everyone and everything” (7). Let us have a look at one more quote from *Hua-yen Buddhism* where Cook is making a similar point. In my view, it might serve as an adequate comment on the philo-

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sophical and existential message of Snyder's writing: the message of oneness and interbeing:

Someone once made the observation that one's skin is not necessarily a boundary marking off the self from the not-self but rather that which brings one into contact with each other. Like Faraday's electric charge which must be conceived as being everywhere, I am in some sense boundless, my being encompassing the farthest limits of the universe, touching and moving every atom in existence. The same is true of everything else. The interfusion, the sharing of destiny, is as infinite in scope as the reflections in the jewels of Indra's net. When in a rare moment I manage painfully to rise above a petty individualism by knowing my true nature, I perceive that I dwell in the wondrous net of Indra, in this incredible network of interdependence. It is not just that "we are all in it" together. We all *are* it, rising or falling as one living body. (Cook 122)

JOYFUL PENETRATION FOR ALL

In *The Practice of the Wild* Snyder stresses the importance of the spiritual practice, of implementing Buddhist philosophy in the here-and-now, of protecting the wild (within and without), of discovering the interconnectedness of things, places, and people. In the chapter "The Etiquette of Freedom" he plays with definitions of the wild. He quotes entries from The Oxford English Dictionary: "of animals—not tame, undomesticated, unruly," "of plants—not cultivated," "of land—uninhabited, uncultivated," "of individuals—unrestrained, insubordinate, licentious, dissolute, loose," "of behavior—violent, destructive, cruel, unruly" (*The Practice of the Wild* 10), and he rightly concludes that *Wild* is largely defined in our dictionaries "by what—from a human standpoint—it is not" (10), which is why it "cannot be seen by this approach for what it *is*" (10). He then provides his definitions:

Of land—a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces. Pristine.

Of societies—societies whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation. Primary cultures, which consider themselves the original and eternal inhabitants of their territory. Societies which resist economic and political domination by civilization. Societies whose economic system is in a close and sustainable relation to the local ecosystem.

Of individuals—following local custom, style, and etiquette without concern for the standards of the metropolis or nearest trading post. Unintimidated, self-reliant, independent. “Proud and free.”

Of behavior—fiercely resisting any oppression, confinement, or exploitation. Far-out, outrageous, “bad,” admirable.

Of behavior—artless, free, spontaneous, unconditioned. Expressive, physical, openly sexual, ecstatic. (*The Practice of the Wild* 10)

Snyder concludes by stating that “most of the senses in this second set of definitions come very close to how the Chinese define the term *Tao*, the way of Great Nature” (11):

eluding analysis, beyond categories, self-organizing, self-informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self-authenticating, self-willed, complex, quite simple. Both empty and real at the same time. In some cases we might call it sacred. It is not far from the Buddhist term *Dharma* with its original senses of forming and firming. (*The Practice of the Wild* 11)

One could argue that the cultivation of the wild is inextricably linked here with the philosophy of *wu-wei* and interdependent becoming. But what strongly informs Snyder’s writing is the idea that the “way” cannot be followed. One can see that in his translation of the opening line of the *Tao Te Ching*: “The way that can be followed (‘wayed’) is not the constant way” (*The Practice of the Wild* 161), or as he puts it “A path that can be followed is not a *spiritual* path” (161).

Snyder’s Earth democracy, a “place-based sense of communion where all beings are interconnected and all beings matter” (Wirth xxiii) seems impossible to achieve without the cultivation of a practice of peace. Reflecting on his work with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Snyder stated in 1985 that “it’s part of our mission [...] as Buddhists to extend the concern for peace outside the human realm to the nonhuman realm” (qtd. in Murphy, *A Place for Wayfaring* 14). In an interview with Gene Fowler, titled “The Landscape of Consciousness,” Snyder asks: “What are we going to do with this planet?” and he provides an answer: “It’s a problem of love; not the humanistic love of the West—but love that extends to animals, rocks, dirt, all of it. Without this love, we can end, even without war, with an uninhabitable place” (Snyder, *The Real Work* 4). The cultivation of peace and compassion is also

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a question of ahimsa—of doing “the least possible harm in every situation” (Snyder, *A Place in Space* 79). For Wirth, Snyder’s ahimsa is “a practice of the Wild that issues from an ongoing awakening that is shaped by wisdom and compassion, these mountains and rivers within and without that are without end” (*Mountains* 113).

Wirth observes that Snyder decenters the human and opens “her in compassion to the value of all things, no longer as things, but as living expression of the Buddha” (xx). David Landis Barnhill writes that Snyder “has, in effect, ‘ecologized’ the Buddhist notion of interpenetration and the image of Indra’s net and ‘Buddhacized’ the notion of ecosystem” (189). We can see how it works when we look at the following passage taken from an interview with Snyder:

I find it always exciting to me, beautiful, to experience the interdependencies of things, the complex webs and networks by which everything moves, which I think are the most beautiful awarenesses that we can have of ourselves and of our planet. Let me quote something:

“The Buddha once said, bhikshus, if you can understand this blade of rice, you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination. If you can understand the laws of interdependence and origination, you can understand the Dharma. If you understand the Dharma, you know the Buddha.”

And again, that’s one of the worlds that poetry has taken, is these networks, these laws of interdependence—which are not exactly the laws that science points out. They are—although they are related—but imagination, intuition, vision clarify them, manifest them in certain ways—and to be able to transmit that to others is to transmit a certain quality of truth about the world. (Snyder, *The Real Work* 35)

THE WILD OR MOUNTAINS AND WATERS

The wisdom of Japanese culture, being so important for Snyder, “extols the importance of the moment, the now, but against the background of eternity” (Carter 136). According to Robert E. Carter, the arts in Japan come closest to “giving voice to the voiceless, and form to the formless” (114). In his view, art accomplishes this by:

directing attention to the particular and finding in each cicada, each stone, each flower, blade of grass, and dewdrop an intimation of the eternity which lines each and every thing in this world, if only one would make the effort to read nature, to merge with nature, and to instantiate the Buddhist vision of the interconnectedness of all things. (115)

The above quotation might serve as a summary of the philosophical and existential context of Snyder's poetry and his philosophy of writing in general. I would argue that *yūgen* as the key aesthetic category plays a prominent role in his immanent poetics. As Eliot Deutsch puts it, *yūgen* is "at once entirely natural and wholly spiritual" (31), and it "teaches us that in aesthetic experience it is not that 'I see the work of art,' but that by 'seeing the I is transformed'" (32). In a letter to Wendell Berry (dated 3 November 1977), Snyder writes: "As poets, our politics mostly stand back from that flow of topical events; and the place we do our real work is in the unconscious, or myth-consciousness of the culture; a place where people decide (without knowing it) to change their values" (qtd. in Gonnerman 135). Snyder's writing certainly opens a space of/for transformation, and those who are ready to enter the Way that cannot be "wayed" may catch a glimpse of the ever-changing "shining way of the wild":

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*Walking on walking,
under foot earth turns*

Streams and mountains never stay the same. (Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers* 9 and *passim*)

Near the end of *Mountains and Rivers Without End* we find a poem titled "We Wash Our Bowls in This Water" which incorporates an "enlightenment poem" written by Su Tung-p'o (also known as Su Shih), an eleventh-century Chinese poet and Ch'an adept. The poem, we learn, is a record of his experience of going beyond duality while sitting "one whole night by a creek on the slopes of Mt. Lu" (Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers* 140). Snyder provides his translation of the poetic piece Su Tung-p'o showed to his master:

The stream with its sounds is a long broad tongue
The looming mountain is a wide-awake body
Throughout the night song after song
How can I speak at dawn. (Snyder, *Mountains and Rivers* 140)

The story has it that Dōgen was so moved by the poem that he wrote his own *waka*:

Colours of the mountains
Streams in the valleys
One in all, all in one
The voice and body of
Our Sakyamuni Buddha (qtd. in Heine 71)

As Heine notes, the *waka* emphasizes the identity of mountains-rivers with the body and voice of Buddha (71). “It extends the doctrine of the ‘true form of all dharmas’ by concluding that not only does the Buddha preach to all things, but all things as they are in themselves are preaching the Dharma and enlightening humans” (Heine 71). The poem also reminds us of Dōgen’s view expressed in his “Mountains and Waters Sūtra,” written in response to Su Tung-p’o’s poem: “each and every aspect of nature is the continuous preaching of the sūtras” (Heine 71), “the inseparability and intimate rapport of humans and Buddha, as well as the unity of nature personified and of humans identified with the entire environment” (Heine 73).

Snyder decides not to quote Dōgen’s poem. Instead, he uses his “Mountains and Waters Sūtra.” This is how we come full circle to the text I mentioned at the beginning of my article, in the context of Snyder’s philosophy of the wild. This time, the issue of “mountains-and-rivers” cosmology and the process of self-realization can be seen from a slightly different angle, when we-rivers never stop and we-mountains never cease:

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[...] Two centuries later Dōgen said,
“Sounds of streams and shapes of mountains.
The sounds never stop and the shapes never cease.
Was it Su who woke
or was it the mountains and streams?
Billions of beings see the morning star
and all become Buddhas!
If *you*, who are valley streams and looming
mountains,
can’t throw some light on the nature of ridges and rivers,
who can?” (Snyder, *Mountains* 140-141)

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