

Yeats and Zen Buddhism

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I

After a period of studying *nō* with Pound, references to Japan and its culture begin to appear casually, naturally one might say, in his writing. But not all of his allusions are related to *nō*; most perhaps are not, so the question arises where *this other information* came from. No sure answer can be given, but one or both of two explanations must be true... At any event, Yeats seems to have acquired certain kinds of knowledge about Japan that Pound never had and to have created in his mind certain images of Japan which were different from Pound's.¹

Thanks to information transmitted to me from Yano Kazumi, former president of the Tokyo Metropolitan University, I think an answer can be offered as to where at least some of "this other information" came from. In correspondence to me, Professor Yano speaks of his having given Suzuki Daisetz's *Essays in Zen Buddhism (1st Series)* to Yeats when he met him in Ireland in 1927.² Moreover, he adds that after that every issue of the *Eastern Buddhist*³ was sent to Yeats.

In a letter in Japanese to Bandō Shōjun of Otani University, Dr. Suzuki himself writes in reply to a question about "Buddha's emptiness" in "The Status":

¹ Earl Miner, *The Japanese Tradition in British and American Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1958), pp. 238-9.

² Daisetz Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism, 1st Series* (Luzac, 1927). Prof. Yano describes his meeting with Yeats in his book *Hen-ei* ("Partial Portraits"), Kenkyusha (Tokyo, 1931), pp. 8-62.

³ The *Eastern Buddhist* (old series) was edited by Suzuki Daisetz and published by the Eastern Buddhist Society.

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

"Buddha's emptiness" referred to by Yeats is most likely *sunyata*. I had sent him my book about that time and it may be that he was reading it when composing this poem. [my translation]

I have reason to believe this book may have been Suzuki's *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture*,⁴ which was published by the Eastern Buddhist Society in 1938. For in this book Dr. Suzuki explains the emptiness of Zen Buddhism as the spirit of Japanese swordsmanship, as follows:

As long as it [the mind] is closely watched every minute of the hour, it is like a newly-adopted *cat kept on a string all the time*, there is no freedom for it, and without freedom it does not *function to its full capacity*. *The ultimate objective is to have the cat wander about freely inside and outside the house and not to do any harm even to the birds kept with her*. To apply this to the mastering of swordsmanship, the utmost degree of perfection is gained when your mind is no more troubled with how to strike the opponent and yet knows how to use the sword in the most effective way when you stand before him. You just strike him down, forgetting that you have a sword in your hand and that somebody is standing against you. No idea of personality is here—all is empty: the opponent, yourself, the striking sword, the sword-holding arms; not only that, even the idea of emptiness is also done away with. From this absolute emptiness there is the most wonderful display of activities.⁵

I have ascertained from Mrs. Ishibashi Hiro, a noted Japanese Yeats specialist, that this book was included in Yeats's library. It would seem to me more than possible that Yeats read this passage, and moreover, that this reading reflected itself in his poetry. In particular, I would point to "The Statues," which has proved one of the most difficult of Yeats's poems for commentators to explain. It was composed in 1938 and published in the collection entitled *Last Poems*, which appeared in 1939 soon after the poet's death.

⁴ D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and Its Influence on Japanese Culture* (The Eastern Buddhist Society, 1938). A second edition of this work, enlarged and revised, was published in America as *Zen and Japanese Culture* (New York, 1959).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 86-7 (italics are mine). The passage quoted, however, seems to have been omitted in the 2nd edition.

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

According to Jon Stallworthy's *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems*,⁶ the evolution of "The Statues" through the poet's revisions, took six months; and "though several pages would seem to have been lost, there remain six sheets of preliminary manuscript working, which at the time of composition were in a loose-leaf notebook; a full draft of the poem on two further sheets; and six typescripts."⁷

An especially noteworthy passage in all these sheets in the manuscript evolution of the poem reads as follows:

Buddha has found a great emptiness.⁸

In all manuscripts prior to this passage, Yeats uses the term *Buddha* in a more negative than affirmative sense; while in all later manuscripts and typescripts, *Buddha* is used affirmatively. From now on, Yeats changes the significance he attaches to *Buddha*. And with this change one can note another: until this time Yeats uses *empty* with both negative and affirmative connotations. Now, the former connotation gradually disappears, giving way to the latter. For example, "this vulgar empty (or emptying) modern tide" has been changed to "this filthy modern tide"; in short, "filthy" has taken the place of negative *empty*, which belongs to objectivity. Affirmative *empty* is subjective. According to Yeats's philosophy as it is called, subjective and objective are inversely proportional to each other, and as one diminishes, the other increases. Therefore, in the absolute subjectivity no objectivity remains. Such an absolute subjectivity, the complete emptying of objectivity, corresponds to that *emptiness* explained by Suzuki. At least, Yeats seems to me to have thought so.

II

The third stanza in "The Statues" runs as follows:

One image crossed the many-headed, sat
Under the tropic shade, grew, round and slow,

⁶ Jon Stallworthy, *Vision and Revision in Yeats's Last Poems* (Oxford, 1969).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132. According to Stallworthy, F. 3v, as it is called, contains this passage.

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

No Hamlet thin from eating flies, a fat
Dreamer of the Middle Ages. Empty eyeballs knew
That knowledge increases unreality, that
Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show.
When gong and conch declare the hour to bless
Grimalkin crawls to Buddha's emptiness.

If I am correct, "Grimalkin" is antithetical to "Buddha's emptiness." For if Yeats read the passage already quoted from Dr. Suzuki, it must have seemed natural to him that the cat should be "kept on a string all the time," for after all Grimalkin is a cat manipulated by a witch. Furthermore, since "the ultimate objective is to have the cat wander about freely inside and outside the house and not to do any harm even to the birds kept with her," this "ultimate objective" has a correspondence with "Buddha's emptiness." The image of a cat kept on string—manipulated all the time by a witch—is the symbol of objectivity. On the other hand, a cat wandering about freely inside and outside the house and doing no harm even to the birds kept with her represents "Buddha's emptiness," or *emptiness* in Zen Buddhism, and therefore she is the symbol of absolute subjectivity. Just as these two kinds of cat are antithetical to each other, so "Grimalkin" is antithetical to "Buddha's emptiness." As for Grimalkin, F.A.C. Wilson points out as follows:

Finally, the image of Grimalkin is one coined in an essay of this period on 'Parnell,' where Yeats contrasts the Goddess Astraea as the symbol of pure subjectivity and the coming cycle, and her antithesis in 'the bridled cat'! The witch's cat of the poem connects with this passage as the symbol of absolute objectivity, the 'dark of the moon'...⁹

Since Grimalkin is relevant to the "dark of the moon" as the image of absolute objectivity, it is no wonder that "Buddha's emptiness" opposed to Grimalkin is relevant to the full moon opposed to the dark moon; in other words, "Buddha's emptiness," or the full moon—absolute subjectivity—is antithetical to Grimalkin, or the dark moon—absolute objectivity.

⁹ F. A. C. Wilson, *Yeats's Iconography* (Gollancz, 1960) p. 301.

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

The following passage from Yeats's own interpretation of his poem, "The Cat and the Moon," obviously supports the idea of Grimalkin as the symbol of modern man who has nearly degenerated into the world of absolute objectivity symbolized by the dark moon.

I allowed myself as I wrote to think of the cat as the normal man and of the moon as the opposite he seeks perpetually, or as having any meaning I have conferred upon the moon elsewhere.¹⁰

In this passage Yeats regards the cat as the real, "normal" man, the moon as the idealized man. Within his conceptual world, such a cat corresponds to the self, and the full moon, to the antithetical self. In his thought, the former would correspond to the Will, and the latter, to the Mask. In the phase of the dark moon, Grimalkin aspires to "Buddha's emptiness" as the full moon, just as the Will does to the Mask.

Again, the antithetical relation between Grimalkin and Buddha's emptiness corresponds to that between "Hamlet thin from eating flies" and "a fat dreamer of the Middle Ages." In his relation to the world of objectivity, such a Hamlet is viewed as modern man, since it is recorded that the cat manipulated by a witch will become "thin from eating flies," and besides, he cannot easily get rid of this world. Therefore, when we see "fat" directly opposed to "thin" in the stanza quoted, we understand well that Yeats, looking at the portrait of William Morris, could not help but mutter to himself, "fat," in envy of the dreamer of the Middle Ages. Of course the poet never despised such a dreamer:

Its grave wide-open eyes, like the eyes of some dreaming beast, remind me of the open eyes of Titian's 'Ariosto,' while the broad vigorous body suggests a mind that has no need of the intellect to remain sane, although it gives itself to every phantasy: the dreamer of the middle ages. It is "the fool of fairy...wide as a hill," the resolute European image that yet half remembers Buddha's motionless meditation, and has no trait in common with the wavering, lean image of hungry

¹⁰ A. N. Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Macmillan, 1968) p. 211.

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

speculation, that cannot but because of certain famous Hamlets of our stage fill the mind's eye.¹¹

Here "fat" thus suggests a broad vigorous body with "a mind that has no need of the intellect to remain sane." Accordingly, Yeats never despised such a dreamer. I think in the poet's mind the dreamer of the Middle Ages had been fused with "Buddha's emptiness," for he wrote that "European image...yet half remembers Buddha's motionless meditation." In fact, "Buddha's emptiness" suggests "a mind that has no need of the intellect to remain sane." In the state of emptiness in Zen Buddhism, where no intellect as distinct from spirit exists, an integrated intellect and spirit can function to fuller capacity than one that is not integrated. Such an emptiness must have been regarded as an ideal by the poet.

It by no means follows from what I have said that Grimalkin is nothing but objectivity. F.A.C. Wilson emphasized simply the objective side of Grimalkin, while A.G. Stock, who attempted to consider Grimalkin in some other aspects, more justly took both the objective and subjective sides into account:

He [Yeats] sees the earthiest and the sublimest sides of medieval thought as products of the same forgotten faith in spirit, operating directly on and through matter, and he contrasts it with modern thought—that of Newton, or 'England and France'—that sees matter obeying mechanical laws and finds no place within the structure for spirit.

This is enough to show that Grimalkin, the witch's cat, is not an image used in contempt of medieval magic. Nor do 'Buddha's emptiness' and his 'empty eyeballs' imply contempt for the Buddha.¹²

Certainly one may acknowledge that Grimalkin has spirit. If so, Grimalkin will be the symbol of Yeats himself and of us, who, though chained to and manipulated by the world of objectivity, will try to climb towards absolute subjectivity; for instance, "Buddha's emptiness." Then, we will have need of our own subjectivity, which must be brought forth by spirit.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 494-5 (italics are mine).

¹² A. G. Stock, *W. B. Yeats—His Poetry and Thoughts* (Cambridge, 1961) pp. 228-9.

III

The fourth stanza of "The Statues" runs as follows:

When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side,
 What stalked through the Post Office? What intellect,
 What calculation, number, measurement, replied?
 We Irish, born into that ancient sect
 But thrown upon this filthy modern tide
 And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,
 Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace
 The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.

When Pearse fought in the Dublin Post Office during the Easter Rising, it was as if the shadow of Cuchulain rose from the dead to stand beside him. It is only in such a moment that a man believing in spirit "transcends his limitations and sees himself as complete."¹³ If so, you will find in Pearse of "The Statues" a correspondence to a Bodhisattva, that is, the Buddha prior to his attainment of enlightenment. In the June, 1933 issue of the *Eastern Buddhist*, which Yeats may be supposed to have read, Dr. Suzuki has the following description of a Bodhisattva.

Bodhisattva was originally the name given to the Buddha prior to his attainment of enlightenment while he was practising the six virtues of perfection (*pāramitā*). The Mahayana places great stress upon this stage of the Buddha's life. The practising of the Paramitas means the assertion of humanity as a social being, the basic idea being that individuals cannot be perfect until society itself is made perfect. This will naturally mean that an individual becomes perfect when he loses his individuality in the all to which he belongs. By losing himself he gains something more than himself, for his perfection consists in being more than himself and not in being just what he is in himself.¹⁴

¹³ F. A. C. Wilson, *W. B. Yeats and Tradition* (Collanz, 1958) p. 188.

¹⁴ *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. VI (The Eastern Buddhist Society, June, 1933) p. 113.

THE EASTERN BUDDHIST

In conclusion, Yeats, to my mind, means that we, "thrown upon this filthy modern tide," should first of all recover subjectivity by believing in spirit, and then climb through "our proper dark" towards such a state, towards the full moon, towards "Buddha's emptiness." Only it should be borne in mind that Zen Buddhism, suggested by means of "Buddha's emptiness," was one of Yeats's masks, and also that to "climb to our proper dark" does not properly belong to Zen Buddhism.