

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

Avian Zen

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I once had a sparrow alight upon my shoulder. . . . I felt that I was more distinguished by that circumstance than I should have been by any epaulette I could have worn.¹

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862)

I don't know anything about consciousness.
I just try to teach my students how to hear the birds sing.²

Suzuki Shunryū-Rōshi 鈴木俊隆老師 (1905–1971)

BIRDS CAPTURE our attention. Pivotal avian moments are embedded in the world of literature and in the lore of Zen Buddhism. What happens when we hear *deeply* and resonate with the call of a bird? The following pages sample centuries of evidence that a birdcall can trigger openings into awakened states of consciousness. They present a plausible physiological explanation for this phenomenon, and suggest why hearing and seeing attentively in the outdoors is such an excellent meditative practice.

Birdcalls Trigger Awakenings Of Consciousness

In his later years, Ikkyū Sōjun 一休宗純 (1394–1481) would become a legendary Rinzai 臨濟 master in Kyoto. But while he was still a young monk

¹ Thoreau 1973, p. 233.

² Chadwick 2007, p. 107.

of twenty-six, Ikkyū went out one dark night alone in a rowboat on Lake Biwa. Out there, he wasn't expecting a crow to fly overhead. Its "CAW!" suddenly triggered his deep awakening.³

Seosan Hyujeong 西山休靜 (1520–1604) was a Korean master who made efforts to unify Seon (Zen) practice and doctrinal study. In his twenties, he was enlightened by the sound of a rooster calling.⁴

Unexpected events that catalyze a "peak experience" are not unique to Zen.⁵ Nor is their association with birds limited to earlier centuries in distant lands. Steve Gray (also known as Adyashanti) recounted a contemporary experience of *kenshō satori*.⁶ It happened when he was thirty-one, after he had practiced Zen for the previous twelve years. While he was meditating, a bird called outside his window. Immediately, "from my gut, I felt a question arise that I had never heard before: 'Who hears this sound?'" Arising next was an extraordinary emotionless state, during which his former Self/other boundary dissolved. At that moment, "I was the bird and the sound and hearing of the sound, the cushion, the room, everything." This was followed by a comprehensive insight: an original "emptiness, prior to the oneness, forever awake to itself."

I recently had occasion to interview Adyashanti privately. Without disclosing the particular question I was interested in, I begin by inviting him to sit down and to simply return to the way it was that morning. He is composed while his words describe how it began . . .

He says he has just taken his seat, but has not yet begun to meditate. Indeed, he adds that he was not actually intending to meditate at that point. Suddenly, a bird calls outside the window. I ask him where the sound is coming from. His right arm reaches up and out into the air at an angle of sixty degrees, and he glances up toward his right hand.

I invite him to identify the kind of bird. That morning he did not recognize what species of bird this was. No word label was attached to this bird, neither then nor subsequently. He still does not know. However, that morning, the bird sound and the rest of his consciousness then became instantly fused into *one field* somewhere in the space directly in front of him.

The Japanese Zen master Bassui Tokushō 抜隊得勝 (1327–1387) has posed a similar hearing question: "Who hears this sound?" It became the classic

³ Covell 1980.

⁴ Joeng and Gak 2006, p. xviii.

⁵ Austin 1998, pp. 452–57.

⁶ Bodian 2004, pp. 44–47, 108–11. This article contains Bodian's interview with Adyashanti. My interview occurred privately on 24 October 2012 when we both attended a conference.

koan, “Who is hearing this sound?”⁷ When the late Robert Aitken-Rōshi (1917–2010) recommended Bassui’s koan to me as a practice, he cautioned that *hearing* was the point, not mere “listening.”⁸ Why did a distinction that emphasized hearing rather than listening become increasingly cogent? Because when researchers improved their neuroimaging studies during the next decade, they began to regard a subject’s effortful trying to “listen harder” as an example of the “*top-down*” approach to paying attention. This top-down phrase refers physiologically to the kind of focused attentiveness that meditators engage in when they choose to activate their *dorsal* system of attention. Anatomically, top-down refers to this more voluntary executive system that is represented in the *upper* parietal-frontal region of our cerebral cortex.⁹

More about the Functional Anatomical Aspects of Hearing (Audition)

In contrast to this more deliberately influenced “northern” route, most other hearing functions happen *choiclessly, effortlessly*, automatically. These early steps in hearing (like those in vision) begin much *lower* down in the brain, during our first milliseconds of perception along more “southern” pathways. These kinds of essentially *reflexive*, habitual functions are now increasingly regarded as examples of “*bottom-up*” attentive processing. A brief survey of both the voluntary and involuntary networks of audition can help us understand why Aitken-Rōshi himself practiced and recommended Bassui’s old koan.

We see only what lies *in front* of us. In contrast, we hear what happens *all around* us. This global auditory field encompasses 360 degrees. The deep roots of our hearing pathways evolved early, at primitive levels down in the brainstem, eons before those later refinements which now serve us so well for vision.

The more primitive parts of our hearing system still process coarse, sub-cortical, survival-type messages. They race up in a “hot-line” through the back of the thalamus and into the orbital frontal cortex. What about our usual, fine-grain auditory information? Once through the thalamus, it travels quickly on up to our *primary* auditory cortex in the temporal lobe. Up here, especially on the *left* side, in the nearby auditory *association* cortex, these auditory impulses are first transformed into the neural codes for language.

⁷ Foster and Shoemaker 1996, pp. 260–66.

⁸ Personal communication with Robert Aitken (2001).

⁹ Austin 2011, pp. 13–20.

Only after they begin to relay forward into the left frontal lobe can they be expressed in the elementary sentences of motor speech, including word-thoughts.

In Aitken-Rōshi's experience, auditory stimuli were often more effective as sensory triggers than were visual stimuli. Various lines of evidence support this suggestion. Notice, for example, where our primary auditory cortex and our auditory association cortex are located. They lie very close to the specialized *bottom-up attentive functions* of the temporo-parietal junction (TPJ) and to the multiple association functions of the adjacent superior temporal gyrus. This TPJ region engages in "circuit-breaker" functions. They help us to disengage attention so that it can then be redirected to its next target. The interactions that link our frontal and temporal lobes then become crucial. Each time we engage in reflexive attentive processing, these ramified networking alliances—led by the *ventral* attention system—will serve many of our cortical needs for more refined decoding and pattern recognition functions.

Yet, what happens the instant we hear an unexpected birdcall or glimpse some relevant avian stimulus that captures our *visual* attention? First to react will be much earlier, deeper receptivities. These signals convey messages from the colliculi in our brainstem up to the thalamus. So, how can we cultivate further the sensitive awareness that has instant, effortless access to these deep, global processing functions? By regularly practicing both concentrative and openly *receptive* styles of meditation in ways that minimize our Self-centeredness.¹⁰

Sky-watching, cloud-watching, and bird-watching are among these excellent outdoor practices. They help train us instantly to detect, recognize, and shift toward *any* unanticipated auditory or visual event.¹¹ Notice how often these openly receptive outdoor practices tend to shift one's attention primarily *up and out*. *Up* means toward events that might arise *in elevations of space above one's usual eye level and mental horizon*. *Out* means "out there," in the distance, toward distant events arising *farther away from one's physical body*. Events in Zen history become more interpretable when viewed from this spatial perspective of functional anatomy.

Early Zen Lore

Exacting styles of teaching developed in Tang-dynasty China (618–907). Chan masters were not only wary of words. They also expected their more

¹⁰ Austin 1998, pp. 20–30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54–60.

awakened trainees to respond in certain ways. Some of these masters' requirements might seem almost to have anticipated the neuroscientific distinctions already sketched in the preceding sections. The patriarchs sought behavioral presentations that were expressed in brisk *body language*. Why did they insist that their pupils manifest immediate *physical* responses? They wanted to observe (what we today would regard as) the earliest clinical evidence of more reflexive pathways. The masters were emphatically *not* interested in hearing discursive speech. Wordy conceptual explanations imply that multiple synaptic delays have occurred, because linguistic constructs keep branching out into the sticky attachments during the course of being further refined.

Indeed, the records indicate that one early Tang master, Damei Fachang 大梅法常 (752–839) once gave the following explicit non-branching advice to his monks: “Reverse your mind, and arrive at its root. Don’t pursue its branches!”¹² Even on his deathbed, Master Damei still exemplified this deeply root-oriented Chan style of direct teaching. Just as he was about to draw his final breath, a squirrel suddenly chattered. Seizing on this last opportunity to instruct his monks, Damei exclaimed: “It’s just this thing! Not something else!” Was his parting advice some abstruse celestial concept? No such homily for Damei. He simply pointed his monks’ attention to just this one ordinary sound. This natural stimulus had just entered the neural root of their auditory system. *Just this*. Direct experience.

A later Tang master incorporated an avian approach into his auditory teaching methods. Jingqing Daofu 鏡清道怱 (868–937) routinely posed simple hearing questions to test his monks.¹³ For example, he would ask: “*What* is that sound outside the gate?” An unenlightened monk once answered: “The sound of a quail.” Master Jingqing was not deaf. He had heard, and recognized, that birdcall many times before. He wasn’t probing for any such species label based on mere words. Indeed, he had previously warned his monks that their thinking was turned “upside-down” when they voiced such discriminating language.

The bird outside the temple gate emits only bare sound energies. When these sound energies reach the ear drum, their earliest neural roots are still very far removed from branching out into temporal lobe word labels. The term, “quail,” can only arise during the later milliseconds. Discriminating word labels are like an identification leg band. No aluminum band, regardless of the

¹² Ferguson 2000, pp. 88–90.

¹³ Cleary and Cleary 2005, pp. 275–78. Here, this same master is referred to as “Ching Ch’ing” according to the Wade-Giles transliteration system. Jingqing is more familiar for using the patter of falling rain as an auditory test stimulus.

amount of information about a bird on it, ever replaces the living reality of the actual bird. Nor does a finger that points at the moon capture the real moon.

Why does Master Jingqing seem so refractory, so disinterested in what to us seems only a reasonable answer? Though he probes his monks with simple direct questions, he still remains highly alert to every nuance of their next response. His attitude is “*Show me. Don’t tell me.*”¹⁴ He’ll wait years to be shown this *behavioral* evidence confirming that his monks had dissolved their old Self/other boundary. When they actually do become enlightened, their overt body language will manifest their awakening. Meanwhile, word-language per se won’t convince him.

Passages in the *Shoulengyanjing* 首楞嚴經 suggest that the Buddha had also emphasized turning one’s stream of awareness successively farther back.¹⁵ One wonders: Which vital functions shift when such a “turning” occurs way back there toward the deep root of one’s consciousness?¹⁶ What happens when the lightning strike of *prajñā* dissolves every psychic root of one’s Self into emptiness and—simultaneously—the brain also awakens into the insight-wisdom of *kenshō satori*?¹⁷ In this state of suchness, no Self-identity remains. In this thusness, no agency of an ego exists that must thrust its own top-down modes of discriminating discourse into complex, branching cortical networks. Such a moment is *oned*, not owned by a Self.

Bassui was still a young monk when he was overturned by such a profound awakening. The auditory trigger for his first deep realization was the turbulent flow of a distant mountain stream. At dawn, after Bassui had meditated through the night, this simple natural sound suddenly penetrated his whole being.¹⁸ At such an instant, when hearing *turns far back toward its pre-cognitive roots*, all body-mind boundaries of one’s former Self vacate the scene. Every primal fear drops out of this non-dual state of perfection. All sense of time dissolves into an awesome impression of eternity (*achronia*).¹⁹

Avian Links to Achronia: The Writings of Stevenson and James

Before William James (1842–1910) published his classic, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he was familiar with a European legend. In this story,

¹⁴ Austin 2009, pp. 217–18.

¹⁵ Quoted in Sekida 1977, pp. 273–77. In English, the *Śūraṅgama Sutra*.

¹⁶ Austin 2006, pp. 39–50.

¹⁷ Austin 1998, pp. 357–87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁹ Austin 2009, pp. 193–96, 270.

the call of a bird suddenly prompts a monk to drop into this state of zero time.²⁰ In 1898, when James recounted this fable (about a nightingale), he included many comments about it that Robert Louis Stevenson (1850–1894) had already made in an earlier essay. Stevenson, a Scot who suffered from tuberculosis during his short life, had realized that this tale had deep existential implications that lay far below its surface. He understood that only an extraordinary state of consciousness could cause a monk to lose *all* sense of time for a very long period. Indeed, said Stevenson, the deep resonances of meaning within such a remarkable state would be so special that they would touch “very near the quick of life.”²¹

As Stevenson begins this story, we find the young monk walking in the woods far outside his monastery gate. Suddenly, he hears “a bird break into song. He hearkens for a trill or two.”²² Abruptly, he loses all sense of the passage of time. Later, his awareness of time returns. At this point, the monk finds himself standing back at that familiar gate of his compound where his walk had begun. Yet now, none of the monks inside look familiar, nor do they recognize him. The sole exception is one brother monk, who now appears many decades older. When the weight of all this evidence finally sinks in, our monk then realizes what had happened: after he heard this birdcall, he had lost all sense of conscious time for the past *fifty years!*

Of course, this is a very tall tale. We today won’t be misled, nor were Stevenson and James, by a fable that grossly exaggerates the brief duration of a remarkable physiological phenomenon. To Stevenson, long familiar with metaphor, it had seemed reasonable to stretch the yarn about this “time-devouring nightingale” simply to dramatize how very special moments do have qualities that lend “spice” to our private lives. Facing an early death, Stevenson had come to realize that the universal fabric of each human life could be woven out of two main strands: Always would we be “seeking that bird”; rarely might we be graced by the reality of actually “hearing him.”

Indeed, this prolific author of *A Child’s Garden of Verses* and *Treasure Island* ventured to observe that it was poetry’s unique contribution to point us toward such moments of “true realism.” Is this an exaggeration? Or could it be nearer to what makes some poetry so special? For example, in Japan, the old saying is: “Poetry and Zen are one” (*shizen ichimi* 詩禪一味).

²⁰ Richardson 2010, pp. 150–51. James was referring to Stevenson’s account of the legend in “The Lantern-Bearers” (Stevenson 1905, pp. 183–205).

²¹ Stevenson 1905, p. 196.

²² *Ibid.*

Poetry, as Stevenson then explains, can penetrate that secret place in the “warm phantasmagoric chamber”²³ of a brain “where joy resides.”²⁴ There, he said, poetic resonances might be amplified into “a voice far beyond singing.”²⁵ In such recesses of memory, we can be reminded of “those fortunate hours in which the bird has sung to *us*.”²⁶

One can only speculate about the degrees to which Stevenson may have become absorbed in the enchantment of some nightingale’s song. Later, William James so valued this same nightingale metaphor that he returned to it in his important essay entitled “What Makes a Life Significant?”²⁷ He hinted, as had Stevenson earlier, at the way the depths of the story alluded to life’s eternal meaning, wherein all apparent conflicts might finally be peacefully reconciled.

Earlier avian tall tales from Asia can remind meditators how to practice during a long silent retreat. One legend about Chan master Yongming Yanshou 永明延寿 (904–975) is that he remained so immobile during a three-month retreat that a bird built its nest in the folds of his clothing!²⁸

Other Literary References to a Birdcall’s Penetrating Impact

Poetic license was the province of another European author, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). His notebook described how a birdcall once resonated in his own consciousness.²⁹ He wrote:

A bird-call was there, both in the outside and in his inner being, concordantly, so to say, since it did not break at the boundary of his body, but formed of the two together an uninterrupted space in which, mysteriously protected, only one single spot of purest, deepest consciousness remained.³⁰

When such an auditory stimulus does penetrate deeply and resonate within a person’s poetic sensibilities at an especially receptive moment, one can understand how it might remain unattached to a particular species label.

²³ Stevenson 1905, p. 204.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197. His italics.

²⁷ Richardson 2010, p. 182. James knew that heart disease would shorten his own life.

²⁸ Ferguson 2000, pp. 367–70.

²⁹ Greene and Norton 1969, pp. 369–70. This description is a transcript from Rilke’s notebook, written during 1906 and 1907 while he was wintering on the Isle of Capri.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

In this regard, Zen teacher Joko Beck once received the following report from a practitioner: “In sitting this morning, it was quiet and suddenly there was just the sound of a dove. [Yet] there wasn’t any dove, there wasn’t any me, there was just this.”³¹ Some of the uses of “just this” back in the Tang dynasty are explored elsewhere,³² and had their origin in earlier Indian Buddhism.

The Benefits of Practice in the Outdoors

What counsel can be given to meditators who wish to practice more selflessly? One approach is to incorporate outdoor experiences seamlessly into your whole program of daily life practice.³³ Random events arise unexpectedly in Nature. They can often capture your *focal and global* attention.³⁴ You don’t need to be a Thoreau, alighted upon by a sparrow, to feel anointed while directly experiencing a wild bird. Many birders bring an innate, elementary enthusiasm to the entire world of Nature. In 2007, Sam Keen, a literary birder, teamed up with a gifted water-colorist, Mary Woodin, to create a slender book, a gem of reflections entitled *Sightings*. Its pages describe and portray extraordinary unpredictable encounters with ordinary wild birds.³⁵

Why do Keen’s perceptions sharpen in the outdoors? Here, in its fertile silence, he discovers the sights and sounds of the sacred. Some reverent events arise visually, in the radiant sunburst of a goldfinch. Other insights enter at twilight in the haunting song of the American wood thrush. What makes this birdcall so special? The wood thrush call “belongs to a family of experiences that usher us into a threshold where sound trails off into silence, time disappears into timelessness, and the known world is engulfed by the great mystery.”³⁶ These ethereal qualities resemble those of its cousin, the European thrush. This latter thrush is the nightingale in Stevenson’s story.

³¹ Beck 1995, p. 227.

³² Austin 2009, pp. 11–13, 199. “Just this” is the pivotal phrase used both by Thanissaro Bhikkhu and by John Ireland in their translations of chapter 1, discourse 10 of the *Udana*. Ireland’s translation “Bahiya Sutta: About Bahiya” is available on the website Access to Insight (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.1.10.irel.html>), as is the one by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, “Bāhiya Sutta: Bāhiya” (<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/ud/ud.1.10.than.html>). Both accessed 29 April 2013.

³³ Austin 2011, pp. 54–60, 130–31.

³⁴ Austin 1998, pp. 664–67.

³⁵ Keen 2007.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Their writings suggest that James, Stevenson, and Rilke were resonating within this avian domain. Only after multiple visits to Japan would the present writer finally be rewarded by an actual glimpse of its furtive bush warbler. In the interim, though having been repeatedly charmed by the liquid warble of the unseen *uguisu* 鶯, its sounds symbolized the elusive way that Zen's covert levels of existential meaning kept unfolding just beyond the reach of this beginner.

In the outdoors, it was the flight of swallows that intrigued Master Hakuin Ekaku 白隠慧鶴 (1685–1769). Their effortless acrobatics served not only to elevate his gaze into the sky but also deepened his appreciation of life in general. The evidence is in his calligraphy. The brush-play in one of his many ink paintings carries this universal message: “For all people crossing the ocean of life and death, how enviable is the flight of the swallow.”³⁷

What other contemporary advice can be offered to meditators whose active “monkey minds” keep leaping from one branching thought to the next? Robert Aitken-Rōshi provides a practical suggestion in the following *gāthā*.

When thoughts form an endless procession
I vow . . . to notice the spaces between them
And give the thrushes a chance to be heard.³⁸

Notice how these verses *turn one's attention way back* into those spaces of silence wherein no-thought awareness resides (*mushin* 無心). A birdcall sometimes actualizes its triggering potential when it penetrates such wordless depths.

In field and forest, *where* might such a fresh stimulus come from? From above? Behind? Either side? From afar? Perhaps from underfoot? Surprises can arrive from anywhere when one is outdoors. Therefore, *all* perceptual systems become more alert, not only hearing and vision, when one bathes in the atmosphere outdoors.

In Summary

Wild birds symbolize the essence of natural, primal energy. Birds freely “wing it” in the open sky, seeming to burst the bonds of gravity that limit other earthlings. In their songs, sightings, and instinctual behavior, birds

³⁷ Seo and Addiss 2010, p. 152. Also included in an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Art Museum in 2011 entitled “Zen Art—The Sound of One Hand: Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin.”

³⁸ Cf. Aitken 1992, p. 31.

help us to celebrate, in ways remote from words, the mysterious reality of this vast natural universe we all inhabit. Thus, when the rōshi Kobori Nanrei 小堀南嶺 (1918–1992) once said to me, “Zen is closest to poetry,” he was voicing much the same truth about poetic “reality” to which Stevenson had referred.

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