**Zen Aesthetics and Animated Perception: Excerpts from Bai’s Published Works on Zen Aesthetics**

1) Excerpts from: Bai, H. (2003). Learning from Zen arts: A lesson in intrinsic valuation. *Journal of the Canadian Association for Curriculum Studies,* *1*(2), 1–14.

EXPLODING DUALISM

Conventionally, we think of beauty as the property of a thing. Hence we speak of the beauty of things. We then go on thinking about the nature of this property, which is what we usually mean by aesthetics. But this way of thinking of beauty is epistemologically untenable for the simple reason that it is meaningless to speak of beauty outside human experience. Beauty is a quality of experience, and experience is neither subjectivist ("all is in one's head") nor objectivist ("it's out there). To characterize experience as either subjectivist or objectivist lands us in an epistemological conundrum from which we cannot extricate ourselves. It is better not to subscribe to the objectivist-subjectivist dualism to begin with. We may speak as if beauty is a property of things, but, in order to not commit an epistemological nonsense, we should understand this property-talk only subjunctively: as if things have beauty. Strictly speaking, beauty is not a property of anything, just as colour is not a property of things. Subscribing to this understanding commits us to a more general epistemological position of the inseparability of the perceiver and the perceived. In experience, there is never a perceiver independent of the perceived, and vice versa. To speak of experience is to speak of the perceiver and the perceived as an inseparable unity. Experience is this unity. The perceiver and the perceived are not two separate, independent entities, and the perception is not something that the perceiver does to the perceived (the process known as 'representation'). The perceiver and the perceived that we conventionally speak of as two separate entities are co-emergent aspects of a single process. If they were separte entities, then, we should be able to catch the perceiver apart from the perceived, and vice versa. But this is never the case. In the act of perception, the perceiver and the perceived arise together simultaneously. What this means is not that an act of coordination is occuring between two separate entities, but that it is ultimately impossible to separate the perceiver and the perceived. We can use all kinds of analogies to illustrate the meaning here: a physical object and its shadow; colour and extension; what is inside and what is outside; skin and the flesh underneath. In all these instances, what we have is the phenomenon whereby we conventionally speak of things as if they are separate, self-contained, independent entities. But there cannot be colour without extension; there cannot be inside without outside, and so on.

But, "Hold on!" interjects a voice of ordinary perception, also known as realism. "If experience is necessarily an event of unity, how come we actually experience the perceiver and the perceived to be two separate entities? For example, I am seeing a catalpa tree yonder in my backyard, and I have no illusion that that I am sitting here and the tree is standing there, and that we are two separate organisms. I am not a tree; the catalpa tree yonder is not me! The catalpa has no idea who I am; it has no access to the pain I am suffering from just now. I sure don't feel like a tree, let alone that particular tree yonder. As far as I am concerned, the tree and I are two distinctly separate entities. My existence maybe contingently affected by it, but I certainly am not essentially constituted by it. If the tree were cut down today, I might feel upset and sad, but I remain the same person. The same goes for the tree."

Let us engage the voice of ordinary perception in an epistemological debate. Getting started may be a struggle, though, since what is required to seriously enter into an epistemological debate is the very understanding that how we see the world and act in it is a matter of conceptual enframing. In other words, we need epistemology in order to enter into an epistemological discussion! But this is not an impossible situation, as it might at first appear, thanks to that marvelous capacity we all are potentially capable of, namely self-reflexivity. Here, I do not mean a formalized, articulated analytic understanding of our cognition, which constitutes the formal study of epistemology. Rather, I have in mind something much more basic and general, namely, being able to recognize, however intuitively, that how one apprehends the world is just one possibility among an infinite number of others and that these possibilities depend greatly on points of view facilitated by socio-historical, cultural frames. Although I posited this recognition here as a basic and general human capacity, this awareness is probably not too easy to come by because of the fact our cognition is normatized. One apperceives and apprehends the world in a certain way precisely because this way has been normatized in oneself as an individual. The very fact that the world appears this or that way rather than one sees the world as this or that is evidence of normatization. Yet we are not completely locked into normatization. As soon as we see different possibilities of normatization, the spell of normatization is broken. This is precisely what happens when people of different norms of perception and comprehension come together and open-mindedly and open-heartedly explore and compare their differences. Now, this process does not come easily or naturally and achieving it should be a critically important educational effort.

Returning to the tree example earlier, when the ordinary perception person (realist) encounters someone who feels a deep resonance with trees, there is the possibility of both of them realizing that how each person apperceives the world is contingent upon a confluence of various normative conditionings that typically occur along the line of sex, gender, class, culture, religion, ideology and so on. When such realization takes hold of individuals, they are freed from metaphysical realism, that is, the notion that how the world appears to one is how the world is, and its dogma of objectivism, that is, there is a world out there, independent of our perception and conception. One no longer thinks naively that how the world appears to one is how the world objectively is and that if the world appears differently to others, they are stupid, crazy, or immoral, or all three altogether. When it arrives at such conclusions, metaphysical realism can cause terrible atrocities and destruction.

Intellectually recognizing that metaphysical realism is operating within us is one thing and overcoming it in practice is another. While the former would help one to achieve the latter, actual overcoming, if desired, is often a stupendous task, requiring dedicated effort, resources and support. For example, how can a person who has no feelings of kinship and resonance with the trees entertain, not just abstractly but concretely and experientially, sentiments of kinship and resonance? Fortunately or unfortunately, we have no cognitive switch that we can turn on to experience one mode of apperception and turn off to create another. In the absence of such a switch, there is only the labourious path of skillful practice whereby individuals undertake transformative activities that shift their cognitive frames. This is where the arts come in.

THE CASE OF ZEN ARTS

All those who are serious about art acknowledge its tremendous transformative power exerted on those who engage in it. "Art," declares Raimundo Pannikar, "is that which articulates life and brings it all together by the 'artistic' creation of the person." Ellen Dissanayake speaks of art as "making special." Many others have expressed a similar view. What exactly is art's transformative power? How does that work? Here I offer a Zen account that, although particular to the Zen tradition, contains an essence of the arts' transformative power.

The effort of Zen may be summed up in one statement: to overcome our discursive consciousness that gives rise to reification. Reification means, simply put, seeing the world through abstract categories and mistaking the latter for reality itself. The well-known Zen metaphor of mistaking the finger that points to the moon for the moon itself perfectly captures the meaning of reification. Now, what is the problem with reification apart from the fact that a mistake is committed. We may hold the view that mistakes are fine so long as they add to the quality of life. Being a pragmatist of some variety myself, I can go along with this view. But the problem with reification is that it feeds metaphysical realism and attendant objectification. Reification is seeing the world through conceptual categories, which, if not carefully seen through, gives the seer the illusion that reality inherently comes in these categories. Categories are, by nature, discontinuous, dichotomous, liner, and most often, dualistic. Hence in seeing reality through categories, we risk the ability to see the intrinsic connectedness behind all phenomena and phenomenal beings (an ability that ecological consciousness demands). In particular, we risk the ability to see the co-arising of the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and the object.

Zen is the realm of experience wherein the ordinary subject-object dualism is replaced by subject-object non-dual unity. Zen art refers to any art that is practiced in a way that aims at overcoming duality and achieving nonduality. Hence there are no particular and exclusive Zen arts, although there are classically developed ones like the tea ceremony (chanoyu), haiku poetry, archery, and so on. Any human endeavour that is undertaken in the spirit of or in pursuit of nonduality can be a Zen art. For this reason, Zen art encompasses an incredible range of art and craft practices, from flower arrangement to haiku, from the tea ceremony to archery. Nonetheless, old and new, they all aim at overcoming our discursivity and achieving nonduality.

The discursive mind or consciousness is a languaged mind. While no one will deny that language is truly a distinguishing feature of humanity and that we owe much of our civilization's stupendous achievements to it, we tend to forget that, as is typical, behind every success is a hidden cost, which signals a failure in other ways. The hidden cost to the discursive mind is our inability to sink deep into and feel embedded in, or be one with, reality. The discursive mind is the intellect. Intellect objectifies reality, thereby abstracting and separating the self from it. The self stands outside (which is the literal meaning of 'existence'--ex sistere), that is, dualized from, reality. It then intellectually processes reality in conceptual categories. When this happens, reality retreats to the background of our consciousness and concepts or notions step into the foreground as substitutes. So long as we reside in intellection--that is, the plane of the discursive--we are not in touch with reality. How do we know when we are in touch with reality? Discursive explanations are no good for non-discursive experience! It is better to go to the poets, both ancient and modern, for evocative, provocative expressions of this ineffable, non-discursive knowing. Here are some samples:

When one sees with ears

and hears with eyes.

one cherishes no doubts.

How naturally the raindrops

fall from the leaves!

. . .

Taste the still air,

hear the still water: new leaves

will spring from the doorpost.

Plum and bamboo will rise through you.

Snowflakes and stones will set roots

through your shoulders and hands.

What a stillness!

Deep into the rock sinks

the cicada's shrill.

Altogether it is best not to even try to give a precise, that is, discursively articulate, description of what the nondual experience is like or how the world would appear when one is in the state of Zen, it is nonetheless useful to provide some provocative and evocative ideas and a sense about the experience to the reader, so that he or she can decide to pursue it or not. Still, given our penchant for substituting explanations and descriptions for the real experience, we should insist that one's effort and time is better spent in actually undertaking a practice that will lead one to Zen. In other words, Zen scholarship is not the point but Zen practice is. To repeat, discursive knowledge about Zen is useful only for the purpose and to the extent, first, of persuading ourselves of the merit of doing Zen, and second, of aiding the practice.

All Zen arts fundamentally boil down to the double-edged effort: putting the discursive mind to rest and to open up the consciousness entirely to the immediacy of the encountered world. These two aspects are interdependent: one supports the other. But what do these two mean? Putting the discursive mind to rest is about freeing oneself from the tyranny of the languaged consciousness. This is how the peerless Buddhist dialectician of the fifth century, Nagarjuna, put it: "Ultimate serenity is the coming to rest of all ways of taking things, the repose of named things." More metaphorically captured, it is to see with the ears and to hear with eyes, as Daito put it. It is to free the senses from the tether of the intellect. To sample an entirely different approach, here is Schopenhauer's exhaustive explication of the process. He is indeed pushing the very limits of discursive explication on a topic that, ironically, defies it!

. . . a man relinquishes the common way of looking at things, gives up tracing, under the guidance of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason, their relations to his own will; if he thus ceases to consider the where, then when, the why, and the whither of things, and looks simply and solely at the what; if, further, he does not allow abstract thought, the concepts of the reason, to take possession of his consciousness, but instead of all this, gives the whole power of his mind to perception, sinks himself entirely in this, and lets his whole consciousness be filled with the quiet contemplation of the natural object actually present. . .; inasmuch as he loses himself in this object . . . .

Schopenhauer's council is echoed by Soetsu Yanagi who gives this advice on the cultivation of artistic perception:

First, put aside the desire to judge immediately; acquire the habit of just looking. Second, do not treat the object as an object for the intellect. Third, just be ready to receive, passively, without interposing yourself.

Normally, our sense perception is very much driven by conceptualization. This is evidence by the phenomenon that Wittgenstein has called 'aspect-seeing." In aspect-seeing, we do not just see things but see them as this or that. This is our ordinary seeing. When we encounter a tree, we briefly register this perception by the name 'tree' and we continue on our way. We have abstractly, categorically, processed the percept. But if we stop in front of the tree, gazed at it, and enter into a silent communion, having filled our consciousness entirely with the tree in all its sensuousness, then this is a profoundly different experience of seeing. The difference lies in the feel of the experience, wherein in the former, the perceiver does not feel a communion with the perceived, whereas in the latter such does occur.

This difference is explained by Frederick Franck as that between looking and seeing. Most often we look but we do not see. Seeing requires something more than cognitively registering percepts, and this something more has to do with the quality of attention. This is how he illustrates the quality of attention:

Driving through the redwoods of California I see 'timber,' until I stop and sit down in front of one tree and start drawing it, with or without pen or paper.

The process of intense, concentrated, undivided attention directed to the tree has the effect of breaking down the discursive division between the perceiver and the perceived, the subject and the object. When perception is no longer filtered through the subject-object duality, what occurs experientially is a tremendous release of psychic energy in the form of sensing aliveness everywhere. The universe is alive, is animate, is brimming with life, even down to pebbles and grains of sand. The opposite of the animate universe is the mechanical universe, a picture of the universe that has prevailed since the seventeenth century, thanks to such giants of the mind as Descartes, Hobbs, and Bacon. In the mechanical universe, the only entity truly alive in itself is the human mind-the seat of intellect, not even the body which is just the container of the mind. The human body is a machine made of flesh. Whatever is not seen as possessing intellect is put into the category of inert matter. To inert matter, we have no ethical obligations, of course. We can do whatever we want to our advantage and amusement. This is how utterly instrumentalistic towards the world we have become. We think nothing of chopping down trees, clearing the land, draining rivers, causing species go extinct. . . Why should we care about these "things" when they are nothing but inert matters? It is only when the perceived is seen as alive and intrinsically valuable that we would think twice about violating its integrity and destroying it.

The catch here is that when the perceived is not seen as alive, then, by association, the perceiver herself tends to become devitalized. After all, despite the perceiver's understanding that she is categorically separate from the perceived, a mutual influence or resonance takes place in psychological reality, and whatever the perceiver thinks of the perceived has an influence on the perceiver herself. Thus, for example, if the perceiver sees the world through the lens of the Cartesian mechanical universe, then this manner of perception will psychically deaden the perceiver sooner or later. One is then caught in a vicious circle of a positive feedback loop: the more one sees the world as a de-animated place, the more one is oneself de-animated; and the more one is de-animated, the more the world appears de-animated, and so on. Civilizationally, we have reached such an advanced point of de-animation that we see no life in mountains, rivers, rocks, and the air. For many people, not even in trees. And for some, not even in animals. This is how Thomas Berry evocatively describes the situation:

The thousandfold voices of the natural world suddenly became inaudible to the human. The mountains and rivers and the wind and the sea all became mute insofar as humans were concerned. The forests were no longer the abode of an infinite number of spirit presences but were simply so many board feet of lumber to be "harvested" as objects to be used for human benefit. Animals were no longer the companions of humans in the single community of existence.

Zen as practice is about re-animating our consciousness so that "new leaves will spring from the doorpost." Zen arts are concrete, sensuous ways to accomplish this re-animation of the self and the universe. The key to Zen arts is, to repeat, resting or arresting the hyperactive intellect by means of complete absorption in what is perceived or experienced. What results is intensification of consciousness through concentrated and sustained attention. All Zen arts provide ways to achieve this intensified consciousness. Such consciousness is no longer divided into the subject and the object, the perceiver and the perceived. The two poles of perception are integrated into a seamless unity, and as a result, a tremendous sense of vitality is released. This is how we re-animate the universe. This is the way to heal our sense of existential alienation and numbing which drives us more and more to such pathological behaviour as treating the world as if it had no life of its own and existed solely for the human consumption and wastage. Panikkar states: "We do not only torture animals--and Men, if we include politics. We torture Matter as well." This sums up very well the kind of damaging presence we humans have been bestowing upon the planet.

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2) Excerpts from: Bai, H. (2002). Zen and the art of intrinsic perception: A case of haiku. *Canadian Review of Art Education*, *28*(1), 1–24.

ZEN AESTHETICS

Among all the traditions of Buddhism, of which there is a great variety, perhaps Zen is most felicitous for the cultivation of the non-discursive and non-dual. This is because Zen did not remain just a religious-spiritual tradition but pervaded the arts and crafts, indeed all aspects of everyday life, and rendered them vital expressions and ways of Buddhist spiritual experience, namely nonduality and non-discursivity (Suzuki, 1959). All manners of art and craft, from flower arrangement (*ikkebana*) to swordsmanship (*kendo*), from Haiku to tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), became the ways (*tao*) of Zen. Although sitting meditation (*zazen*) remained the standard practice, the royal road, in "pursuit" of Enlightenment,[[1]](#endnote-1) these Zen arts and crafts vastly broadened the possibilities of Zen practice, in effect bringing Zen out from the hermitages and temples to the streets of ordinary folk. Everyone can practice Zen, for the Zen tradition offers manifold arts, crafts, and rituals as different paths to the same goal of attaining the intrinsic perception of the world. Moreover, there is no reason written into the essential understanding of Zen why non-traditional or non-Japanese arts and crafts cannot be equally effective practices of Zen. The essence of Zen (and Buddhism in general), which is enligtenment (*satori*), is transcultural, and for this reason, the expressions of Zen can assume any cultural modes.[[2]](#endnote-2) What is *satori*? Briefly stated, *satori* is discovering the intrinsic meaning in all that we experience. In the words of Daisetz T. Suzuki (1959, p. 16): "The meaning thus revealed is not something added from the outside. It is in being itself, in becoming itself, in living itself. [The meaning consists of] the 'isness' of a thing, Reality in its isness." Suzuki (ibid. p. 17) goes on to elucidate the vital connection between Zen and artistic perception:

When the mind, now abiding in its isness . . and thus free from intellectual complexities and moralistic attachments of every description, surveys the world of the senses in all its multiplicities, it discovers in it all sorts of values hitherto hidden from sight. Here opens to the artist a world full of wonders and miracles.

Although this passage may give the impression that through first discovering intrinsic perception and valuation we are then able to access the world of artistic perception and creation, the converse is equally valid. And it is this converse that particularly interests me in my project of resisting instrumentalism and promoting intrinsic perception and value. Through engaging in artistic perception and creation, we can access the intrinsic.

Now, in talking about the intersection between artistic perception and intrinsic valuation, I do not mean to define what art is, as if it is one thing. Art, like life itself, is diverse enough to encompass a wide range of purposes and meanings, methods and expressions, and complex enough to resist defining. Instrumentalism, too, is not foreign to art. However, I believe that intrinsic perception is particularly evident in artistic engagement. Even though the final product of the engagement is for an instrumental purpose, the process itself calls for a sustained intrinsic attitude, perception, and action. It is this aspect of art that Zen aesthetics focuses on. Soetsu Yanagi (1972, p. 112), whose Zen-infused understanding of arts and crafts is revered, has outlined three pieces of priceless advice to anyone who wishes to cultivate artistic perception:

First, put aside the desire to judge immediately; acquire the habit of just looking. Second, do not treat the object as an object for the intellect. Third, just be ready to receive, passively, without interposing yourself. It you can void your mind of all intellectualization, like a clear mirror that simply reflects, all the better. This nonconceptualization – the Zen state of *mushin* ("no mind") – may seem to represent a negative attitude, but from it springs the true ability to contact things directly and positively.

In the following section, I shall explore a particular Zen art, *haiku* poetry, to illustrate how an art form can achieve nonconceptualization. *Haiku* is an example extraordinaire because it demonstrates that overcoming hyper-discursivity is not a matter of somehow or another disabling or eliminating our discursive mind but, rather, working with it skillfully. The former effort is doomed to fail, anyway. Discursivity is a pervasive condition of our being: whatever non-discursivity we have to attain has to emerge from skillfully working with our discursivity. It is for this reason that I am interested in exploring *Haiku*, the well-known Japanese poetic form that uses 17 syllables in 3 lines. Through this illustration, I hope to demonstrate my thesis that the fact of our having to use words does not necessarily compromise our attaining wordless silence and that a discursive activity like poetry-making can be a way to experiencing the world non-discursively and intrinsically. Indeed, in *haiku*, we see a perfect example of non-duality, of overcoming of the apparent duality, between language and silence.

*HAIKU*

*Haiku* became a Zen art in the hands of Matuso Basho (1643 - 1694), Japan's most celebrated *haiku* poet to this day. Before Basho, haiku was "mere plays on words with nothing deeper than pleasantries" (Suzuki, 1959, p. 239). But Basho revolutionized *haiku*, launching the beginning modern *haiku*. With him *haiku* became a tool of intrinsic perception. Here is a well-known (immortalized, I should say) *haiku* by Basho.

*Furu ike ya The old pond*

*Kawazu tobikomu A frog leaps in*

*Mizu no oto And a splash*

This seems like a deceptively simple, child-like (or some would even say, a childish) poem. It seems to present no literary challenge: there is nothing complex, suspicious of hidden, layered, "laminated" meanings, so typical of most poems. So much so that it seems to require no interpretation. What a welcome change such simple poetry is in an English literature course! Even the least poetic students are confident that they can turn out a few *haiku* poems. This appearance of utter brevity and simplicity, however, has provoked a profound misunderstanding that *haiku* is an easy and simple poetry. But, emphatically, *haiku* is not an intellectually unsophisticated, simplistic poetry. What we have here is something far more strange and radical: an "end of language," as Barthes (1982) puts it so pithily. The "frog in the pond" *haiku* is said to mark Basho's enlightenment, his attainment of intrinsic perception. Enlightenment, as it is understood in Zen or Buddhism in general, consists of, precisely, the break-through from the linguistic-conceptual mind that stands in the way of directly, intuitively, hence intrinsically apprehending the reality. Barthes' (1992, p. 74) commentary is incomparable:

When we are told that it was the noise of the frog which awakened Basho to the truth of Zen, we can understand (though this is still too Western a way of speaking) that Basho discovered in this noise, not of course the motif of an 'illumination,' of a symbolic hyperesthesia, but rather *an end of language*: there is a moment when language ceases (a moment obtained by dint of many exercises), and it is this echoless breach which institutes at once the truth of Zen and the form – brief and empty – of the haiku. (emphasis added)

Let us take a closer look at Basho's "frog in the pond" *haiku*. Conspicuously absent are descriptive [parts]: there are no adjectives, adverbs to describe the named things and actions. What does this absence mean? Here is Barthes (ibid. p. 78) again:

Description, a Western genre, has its spiritual equivalent in contemplation, the methodical inventory of the attributive forms of the divinity or of the episodes of evangelical narrative . . . the haiku, on the contrary, articulated around a metaphysics without subject and without god, corresponds to the Buddhist Mu, to the Zen satori, which is not at all the illuminative descent of God, but "*awakening to the fact,*" apprehension of the thing as event and not as substance . . ."(emphasis added).

Descriptions mediate reality. We see reality *through* descriptions. Thus, descriptions stand in the way of our immediate, that is, unmediated, perception of what is. Now, I am aware that the notion of unmediated perception has been vigorously disputed in western epistemology. We have been told time and again that all perceptions are conceptually, therefore, linguistically, mediated.[[3]](#endnote-3) However, Buddhist epistemology disputes this claim on an empirical ground: with an adequate "training" of the attention, it is possible to experience "thought-less" perception (Brown and Engler, 1986). For instance, one is able to catch the "naked," unmediated, nondiscursive, perception prior to its conceptual dressing-up.

Assuredly, the attentional training is difficult to undertake. Our mind has the tendency to wander off into discursive thinking, performing continually the linguistic-conceptual feat of seeing things as this or that. This, as we discussed earlier, is Wittgensteinian aspect-seeing. It is not an overstatement that we almost never see things simply as themselves. So heavily mediated by conceptualization, therefore discursive, is our consciousness that we hardly ever notice things and beings for what they are apart from what they mean to us. *Haiku* is one form of consciousness training to decondition the discursive mind, special in that it involves directly working with language. To express it a little ironically, *haiku* is a language that puts a break on our languagedness. How does that work? Lucien Stryk's (1977, p. 23) following comments reveal his incisive understanding of Zen and *haiku*:

The Zen experience is centripetal, the artist's contemplation of subject sometimes referred to as 'mind-pointing'. The disciple in an early stage of discipline is asked to point the mind at (meditate upon) an object, say a bowl of water. At first he is quite naturally inclined to metaphorize, expand, rise imaginatively from water to lake, sea, clouds, rain. Natural perhaps, but just the kind of 'mentalization' Zen masters caution against. The disciple is instructed to continue until it is possible to remain strictly with the object, penetrating more deeply, no longer looking at it but, as the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng maintained essential, as it. Only then will he attain the stage of muga, so close an identification with object that the unstable mentalizing self disappears.

The brevity of *haiku* (only seventeen Japanese syllables) forces the discursive mind to reverse its expansive flow of energy and purpose and become concentrated, focused. What is aimed at is the intensification *of consciousness*.[[4]](#endnote-4) The consciousness must become so focused and intense that there is no room left for subjunctivity of language: no seeing-as. Thus the mind, that great organ of narratives and metaphorical thinking, becomes silent. Basho (Barthes, p. 72) himself has commented on the requirement of the silent mind: "How admirable he is who does not think 'Life is ephemeral' when he sees a flash of lightning!" Only in utter silence of the mind, the mind that has stopped moving in the discursive space, one "awakens to the fact": this is enlightenment in the Eastern sense. Barthes' comments (ibid., pp. 74 - 75) are, again, incomparable. I have not encountered a more incisive understanding of Zen: I shall quote the passage at length:

All of Zen, of which the *haiku* is merely the literary branch, thus appears as an enormous praxis destined to *halt language*, to jam that kind of internal radiophony continually sending in us, even in our sleep. . to empty out, to stupefy, to dry up the soul's incoercible babble; and perhaps what Zen calls *satori*, which Westerners can translate only by certain vaguely Christian words (*illumination, revelation, intuition*), is no more than a panic suspension of language, the blank which erases in us the reign of the Codes, the breach of that internal recitation which constitutes our person; and this state of *a–language* is a liberation, it is because, for the Buddhist experiment, the proliferation of secondary thoughts (the thought of thought), or what might be called the infinite supplement of supernumerary signifieds – a circle of which language itself is the depository and the model – appears as jamming: it is on the contrary the *abolition* of secondary thought which breaks the vicious infinity of language.

I shall end this section with two more of Basho's well-known haikus:

*Shizukasa ya* Quietness –

*Iwa ni shimiiru* The cicada's cry

*Semi no koe* Penetrates the rocks.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The story has it that Basho was visiting an ancient Buddhist temple on a remote mountain in autumn, and there amongst old pine and oak trees, he heard a cicada's cry. Was the stillness simply a matter of the remote location, or, besides that, was it a state of awareness attained [if] one were freed from, emptied of, "the soul's incoercible babble"? The fractious, forever fretting ego-self, so addicted to seeing the world in terms of its own gains and losses, is for once unperturbed: "Quietness –." All beings of the world, finally, have the chance to be present to our consciousness as themselves – singular, finite, impermanent beings: "The cicada's cry." But this intrinsic perception of beings is at once a non-dual, unitary vision of Being wherein all beings emerge out of and merge into the infinite Being: "Penetrates the rocks."

Here is another *haiku* by Basho [that] is cited by many for the purpose of elucidating the difference between what I have been calling intrinsic perception and instrumental perception[[6]](#endnote-6):

*Yoku mireba* Looking closely, I see

*Nazuna hana saku* A shepherd's purse blooming

*Kakine kana* Under the hedge.

*Satori*, the zen experience of enlightenment, is none other than *just seeing* (hearing, tasting, and so on), perception of "the *myo*, the as-is-ness of things, of their intrinsic, unhallowed sacredness" (Franck, 1993). What is required to see the *myo* of things is "[l]ooking closely," an undivided attention, freed from the egoic, therefore instrumentalist, desires and designs. To the enlightened eye, there are no insignificant weeds and "mere things": all beings in their "original face" are beyond measure, and therefore, beyond value: they are *in*valuable.

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3) Excerpts from: Bai, H. (2013). *Peace with the Earth: Animism and contemplative ways.* Cultural Studies of Science Education, CSSE, 2 (8), DOI 10.1007/s11422-013-9501-z. (M. P. Mueller & D. A. Greenwood (Eds.), Special Issue of CSSE on Ecological mindfulness and cross-hybrid learning.)

My own contemplative practice base has been in the Buddhist traditions, especially in Zen. However, in more recent years, I have also taken a keen interest in Daoist philosophy and practice with its focus on ‘nourishing’ the person in embodied ways, seeing its close resonance with Appelbaum’s understanding of the *stop* phenomenon. Given my quest for ‘animated perception’, the Daoist practice that aims at the perceiver experiencing the whole world/earth as vibrating and pulsing with *qi (*氣: vital energy, organic energy, or life force) promises to be very helpful to my research.

*“TURNING THE LIGHT AROUND”*

The Daoist texts, and classical Chinese philosophy texts in general, are not easy to comprehend to us who have been educated into the mode of thinking that are abstract, categorical, analytic, and essentialistic or decontextualized (Hall, D. & Ames, R. T., 1998). Consider, for example, the following passages from *The secret of the golden flower[[7]](#footnote-1)* (Cleary, 1991) that I have been trying to work with in my personal practice: “When the light is turned around, the energies of heaven and earth, yin and yang, all congeal” (p. 17) Also: “Nothing is worse than to have a running leakage of spirit and consciousness; this is conformity, so the way of the golden flower is accomplished completely through the method of reversal” (p. 18). Again: “The turning around is stopping, the light is seeing. Stopping without seeing is called turning around without light; seeing without stopping is called having light without turning it around” (p. 21). These would have remained more or less unintelligible passages for me if I hadn’t previously encountered Appelbaum’s *The stop,* and made sense of the movement and management of percipient energy. Believing, as I do, that these kinds of neurophysiological experiences are usually transcultural, even if ways to get to the experience are culturally variant in terms of language expressions and practices, I applied my understanding of percipient energy to the Daoist concept of ‘turning the light around’, and made sense of the latter. What both *The stop* and *The secret of the golden flower* are pointing to is the possibility of *doing* our perception differently than the usual way we go about perceiving the world. (More on *the usual* *way*, later.) And this different way holds key, I believe, to an embodied and animated perception of the world. This different way is the contemplative way.

Appelbaum (1995) states: “The stop neutralizes a tendency of percipient energy to animate intellectual categories through which events are viewed” (p. 80). In the next paragraph, he further states: “Once percipient energy does not *go out*, it is more available to events within the organism” (Ibid.). So the first step to doing perception differently is to create the condition of the *stop*, and this is where the meditation practice comes in. Meditation is foremost an activity of quieting the constant “mind chatter” or “monkey mind” that, according to Appelbaum, continuously drains the body of organic energy. My own experience validates this. While some thoughts and emotions are more stressful and energy-draining than others, such as worries about one’s children, financial security, or relational turmoil, all thoughts, by their constancy and sheer volume, are energy depleting. When consumed by mental activities, we feel depleted, listless, and ‘spent’. This phenomenon is what I mean by *de-animation* and *disembodiment*. Our typical response to this situation of depletion is reaching for the nearest stimulants of one form or another. More coffee, please! But the body drained of organic energy cannot be restored by stimulants, however powerful and effective their short-term benefits may be. Stopping the constant and subtle source of energy depletion and recharging the nervous system is what we need to do. This practice, when seriously undertaken, would radically change the manner of our *presence* on this planet. This, I would suggest, is the promise of animism for environmental education.

The cardinal practice in ‘turning the light around’ or Appelbaum’s *Stop* or any of the contemplative practices is, then, to calm and quiet the mind so that one’s attention is not continually grabbed and occupied by mental objects, be they thoughts, feelings, sensations, and images. *The Secret of the Golden Flower* instructs: “ . . . see to it somehow that you don’t have much on your mind, so that you can be *alive and free*. Make your mood gentle and your mind comfortable, then enter into quietude” (P. 31; italics, mine). Further: “Even as you let go of all objects, you are alert and self-possessed” (p. 32). And here is an important warning for us who are in quest of animated perception: “Even in the midst of alert awareness, you are relaxed and natural. . . . If you tend to fall into a *deadness* whenever you go into meditation and are relatively lacking in growth and creative energy, this means you have fallen into a shadow world. Your mood is cold, your breath sinking, and you have a number of other chilling and withering experiences” (p. 32. italics, mine). I have encountered many meditators who seem to achieve quietude of some kind but show signs of cold and depressed mood, lacking vital and creative energy.

*The Secret of the Golden Flower* is explicit, as with many other meditation instructions, about the connection between concentration or attention and energy. The way to gather energy is through concentration of mind: “When the mind enters, the energy enters; with warm energy, the birth [of altered perception] takes place” (p. 25). And, again in accord with many meditation instructions, the way to control the mind is through breath: “If the mind tends to run off, then unify it by means of the breath; if the breath tends to become rough, then use the mind to make it fine” (p. 26). In other words, by “tuning the breath” (p. 24), we can regulate the flow of percipient energy. The flow we aim for is the reversal of the ordinary, and is achieved by preventing the leakage and dissipation of organic energy out of the body, thereby recharging and re-animating the latter.

How do we know when we have “turned the light around” and achieved animated perception? No external instrument of detection and calibration exists, and for a good reason. We will know it subjectively when we see, feel, taste, and hear the world differently: more alive, vivid, curious, awe-inspired, present, sacred, meaningful, and so on.

*(From Heesoon’s Journal, Spring 2012) I have been introducing Frederick Frank’s Zen Drawing to my graduate classes in here and there for the past many years. Some students quickly warm up to this form of contemplative activity. One of the students, who was both an artist and an environmental educator, decided to do a Zen Drawing with plants as part of her presentation. She brought small potted plants, one for each person, for our seminar group. Mine was an ivy plant. As minutes ticked away in my concentrated and absorbed state, my eyes only following the every detail of the plant, never looking at my drawing hand or what I have drawn, something quite extraordinary was taking place in my perception. The ivy plant “came alive,” literally before my very eyes. Of course, I knew, intellectually, that the plant was alive, was a living being. But this is not the same thing as what I experienced at that moment. I’m searching for words to adequately describe the extraordinary experience I had. The ivy was glowing with an extraordinary degree of vividness in appearance . . . and for a moment, I thought I saw some movement, too, as if wriggling or vibrating. What was happening? For my part, I was not under any chemical influences, and I was not prone to mental instability. Whatever the biochemical and neurological explanations there might be for how I ended up with this experience, I shall not use them to ‘explain away’ my experience. What is important here is that I had this experience through accessing the state of concentration and absorption—a pause in my ‘ordinary consciousness’, and that this experience allowed me to see the plant in a more animated light. This meeting with the plant—was there not the sacred sense of the Buberian I-Thou encounter here?--was an extraordinarily touching experience for me.*

I understand that we have two different autonomic nervous systems: sympathetic and parasympathetic. I also understand that the contemporary ethos, lifestyle and activities tend to overtax the sympathetic nervous system that engages us in the fight-or-flight stress response (Fehmi, 2007). For sure, we are designed to have our sympathetic nervous system taxed, but only now and then, once in a while, as when we find ourselves being chased by a tiger and the like. Now, we are, or we think we are, chased constantly and relentlessly by all manners of virtual tigers. The growing appeal of meditation in our culture[[8]](#footnote-2) bespeaks the level of stress and anxiety in the general population. Unmitigated and accumulating stress, perhaps literally, burns out the nervous system, and the person is left consumed and depleted, physically, emotionally, and otherwise.

Meditation is a very challenging activity for most of us. We are so deeply conditioned, as it were, to run on the *monkey mind* program, that it is very difficult for us to switch off the program. Anyone who, as a beginner, has attempted to do sitting meditation would readily attest to it. It is indeed bewildering and discouraging to come out of a 20-minute sitting, feeling exhausted and stressed out from being chased around and buffeted by unending streams of thoughts and feelings. One did *nothing* but sitting still, right?

Essentially, the goal of meditation is achieving a state of consciousness that is tranquil (in contrast to: noisy, anxious, fractious, frenetic, carving and grasping), spacious (in contrast to: constricted, narrow, tight, stuck, panicky), and full of warm and radiant aliveness (in contrast to: unfeeling, cold and grey, flat, deadened). But to compound the difficulty of this already challenging practice, if one tries hard to ‘achieve’ these states, that very trying hard will compromise the effort and would not bring about the desired results. Tranquility, calm and balanced presence are precious achievements, indeed.

*ANIMISTIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD*

Raimundo Panikkar (Raimon Panikkar), intercultural philosopher, Catholic priest, Hindu scholar, and Buddhist practitioner, whose re-vision of philosophy’s mission influenced me greatly in my own re-direction as a philosopher of education, states: “ . . . Philosophy has to take a stance and offer avenues of action for a more just and brighter “Human Future” (1992, p. 237). One of these action points Panikkar proposes is recovering animism. He states: “ . . . I understand by animism the experience of life as coextensive with nature. Every natural being is a living cell part of a whole, and mirroring the whole at the same time. Not only animals and plants are alive, also mountains and rocks, matter as well as spirit” (p. 243). And he adds: “Animism stands, further, for the relatedness of all reality according to one principle which is itself all relatedness and not univocal. To say all is alive . . . affirms the moving, free, precisely living relationship of every brim of Reality” (p. 243). This, to me, expresses the deepest spirit and clearest understanding of animism.

Theodore Rozak, who is credited with coining the term “ecopsychology” (1992), proposes, from a viewpoint of psychologist, that “[e]copsychology seeks to recover the child’s innately *animistic quality of experience* in functionally ‘sane’ adults” (p. 320; italics mine). In Rozak’s words, I recognize my own journey of disenchantment and gradual loss of touch with the animistic sensibility that was core to my primary humanity as experienced in my early childhood.

It also makes total sense now why reading Maurice Berman’s *Re-enchantment of the world* (1981) in the 80’s, when I was first trying to figure out my cultural dislocation as an immigrant in Canada, was absolutely eye-opening. Reading it, I began to understand, more articulately, the historicity of my own life: how my own experience of losing touch with animistic sensibility is part and parcel of the modernism through westernization that was strived to be accomplished in Korea over a single generation. My own family history illustrates this, and I embody the cultural dislocation in accomplishing the transition from animism to modernism over a single generation.

However, lest my readers think that my advocacy for animistic quality of experience (Rozak, 1992) is driven simply by personal nostalgia, I would like to address this possible misimpression with a quote from Stephen Jay Gould (as cited in Orr, 1994):

We cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love. (p. 43)

This emotional bond is what animistic sensibility is most strongly about, and hence it is my contention that cultivating this sensibility is an urgent task in environmental education. I am aware that my view here may not be mainstream in the environmental education discourse. David Orr (1994) reminds us:

Mainstream scholars who trouble themselves to think about disappearing species and shattered environments appear to believe that cold rationality, fearless objectivity, and a bit of technology will get the job done. If that were the whole of it, however, the job would have been done decades ago. Except as pejoratives, words such as *emotional bonds*, *fight*, and *love* are not typical of polite discourse in the sciences or social sciences. (p. 43)

Indeed, “fight” is not as foreign as “love” in the academic or intellectual discourse. Love is altogether a difficult task. Panikkar (1992) states,

[I]t is the task of philosophy to know, to love, and to heal—all in one. It knows in as much as it loves and heals. It loves, only if it truly knows and heals. It heals if it loves and knows. (p. 237)

We have been culturally inducted and educated into hurtful and hurting knowledge, not love’s knowledge (Bai & Romanycia, in press). Any knowledge that one acquires “without learning to form respectful relationships with the object of knowledge” (Bai & Romanycia, in press) is potentially hurtful and hurting knowledge. And how can we form respectful, and I would add, *loving*, relationships with our objects of knowledge when we see them as inanimate, inert, disposable ‘things’? We cannot. David Abram (1996) is incisive in his analysis:

To define another being as an inert or passive object is to deny its ability to actively engage us and provoke our senses; *we thus block our perceptual reciprocity with that being*. By linguistically defining the surrounding world as a determinate set of objects, we cut our conscious, speaking selves off from the spontaneous life of our sensing bodies. (p. 56)

To (re)turn to animism is to see the world and all its inhabitants—including mountains, rocks, rivers, wind, water . . . —as ‘alive’, preciously alive, and deserving of our respect, love, and compassion. But, as I labored to show in this paper, becoming an animist and learning to see the whole and every part of the world as alive goes against the grain of all our conditioning that has produced the everyday consciousness of modern sensibility. I endeavoured to show in this article that contemplative ways and practices would be a way to turn us towards animism.

The final words in this paper go to Raimundo Panikkar (1992):

No ecological renewal of the world will ever succeed until and unless we consider the Earth as our own Body and the body as our own Self. (p. 244)

Again:

We kill, and extract from the very womb of matter, the extra energy units which our greed needs because we have disrupted the rhythms of Nature. We do not only torture animals—and Men, if we include politics. We torture Matter as well. (p. 244)

Finally:

Peace with the Earth excludes victory over the Earth, submission or exploitation of the Earth to *our* exclusive needs. It requires collaboration, synergy, a new awareness. (p. 244)

Animism is this new awareness.

1. Of course, Enlightenment cannot be "pursued," and the approach of pursuing will guarantee a failure, for, Enlightenment arises only when our grasping, pursuing mode is abandoned. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Zen Buddhism itself is a good example of the essence of Buddha's teaching (*Dharma*) taking a creative hybrid form in the host Japanese culture steeped in Shintoism. (*Chan* Buddhism, a source of Japanese Zen Buddhism, is also something of a cultural hybrid between Indian Buddhism and Taoism.) The same creative adaptations are happening to American Buddhism. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On an empirical ground, I dispute this claim. While we may accept that, indeed, much of our perception *ends up* being mediated, it is empirically untrue that there are no perceptions that are conceptually and linguistically unmediated. My claim is empirically verifiable by self-observation (how else can we verify this claim, anyway?), but the catch is that such observation takes a degree of refinement in attention. Incidentally, the Buddhist insight meditation (*vipassana*) prescribes a specific training for this refinement of attention. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A common misconception exists that all meditation is a way to expand one's consciousness. Not for the Buddhist meditation whose requirement is a clear and penetrating awareness: in order to gain this, consciousness has to be focused and distilled, not dispersed and wandering, as in day-dreaming. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Quoted from Makoto Ueda (1995, p. 157). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. One poem most frequently quoted as a contrast to Basho's *Nazuna haiku* is Tennyson's "Flower in the Crannied Wall" in which the poet plucks out the flower, root and all, in order to study it and come to understand God and Man. D. T. Suzuki (1959, p. 265) comments: "What we can say generally about Western poetry on nature is that it is dualistic and personal, inquisitive and analytic." [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “The Secrete of the golden flower is a lay manual of Buddhist and Taoist methods for clarifying the mind. A distillation of the inner psychoactive elements in ancient spiritual classics, it describes a natural way to mental freedom practice in China for many centuries” (Cleary, 1991, p. 1). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
8. Currently, all over North America, mindfulness meditation is used to combat stress in all manners of setting and context, from schools to hospitals. As well, body-mind-heart integrative practices like yoga, qi going, and tai-ji are becoming mainstream, especially in metropolitan cities where there is much multicultural confluence. These practices serve to provide relief from the stress of our fast-paced, complex, restless, and driven culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)