

**BOB DYLAN'S ZEN GARDEN:  
CROSS-CULTURAL CURRENTS IN HIS  
APPROACH TO RELIGIOSITY<sup>1</sup>**

*Steven Heine  
Florida International University*

**Dylan's Spiritual Influences, Eastern and Western**

It has been said, "Religion looms large in Dylan's worldview."<sup>2</sup> During every phase of his career, Bob Dylan has portrayed himself as an outcast or misfit, a drifter or wanderer, or a stranger in a strange land toiling in perpetual exile yet struggling to gain redemption by breaking through the ever-challenging gates to heaven. From the mournful pleas of the "Man of Constant Sorrow" on his first album *Bob Dylan* (1962) to awaiting mixed blessings "When the Deal Goes Down" on the recent *Modern Times* (2006), Dylan's ongoing quest for elusive paradise has continued unabated.

As a critic of Dylan points out, "Folklore, ethnomusicology, linguistics, anthropology, literary criticism, and philology: none of these can be left aside in a thorough attempt to gain insight into the rich dynamics and designs of Bob Dylan's performance artistry."<sup>3</sup> The same must also be said for the field of religious studies, and while the main focus has been on various aspects of Western traditions, this makes the case for injecting Eastern mysticism into the multi-disciplinary, multi-cultural mix because of Dylan's wide-ranging affinities with Zen Buddhism, which are in part historical/biographical and also spiritual/intellectual. Examining Dylan's relation with Zen underscores that the more remote and exotic the cultural

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally presented at a symposium on Bob Dylan held at the University of Minnesota in March 2007, and some of this material appears in *Bargainin' for Salvation: Bob Dylan, A Zen Master?* (New York: Continuum, 2009). All quotes of Bob Dylan's lyrics are taken from the official website, <http://bobdylan.com>, by permission of Dylan's manager, Jeff Rosen.

<sup>2</sup> M. Cooper Harriss, "Religion in *Modern Times*," *Sightings* (August 10, 2006); [http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive\\_2006/0810.shtml](http://marty-center.uchicago.edu/sightings/archive_2006/0810.shtml).

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Mason and Richard Thomas, "Introduction [to special issue on Bob Dylan]," *Oral Tradition* 22/1 (2007): 3.

context he pursues, the more intimate and familiar the sense of truth it reveals.

Dylan's songwriting was greatly influenced by American folk/blues music as well Beat poetry and a variety of other literary sources. In considering the role of religious imagery, the most prominent source of inspiration seems to be an extensive use of biblical references. Whether interpreted from either a Judaic/Old Testament perspective or a Christian/New Testament one, citations from the Bible appear in just about every album. This includes, but is not limited to, his gospel stage that began in the late 1970s and endured until the early '80s.<sup>4</sup> But is the Bible the sole factor needed to assess the spiritual dimensions of Dylan's life work?

It is clear that Japanese culture, Zen Buddhism in particular, was making an imprint on Dylan's approach to music-making during the mid-1970s. This phase, marked by several direct references and indirect allusions in Dylan's writings, lasted for several years through the time of his first Far East tour in 1978. It culminated with an explicit mention of Zen gardens visited in Kyoto in album liner notes that appeared just months before his conversion to Christianity less than a year later. The rise and fall of an interest in Zen in relation to the awakening of a Christian consciousness is a very important biographical juxtaposition that is generally overlooked in the field of Dylanology. This is primarily because most critics are not sensitive to the issue of Eastern affinities and possible influences.

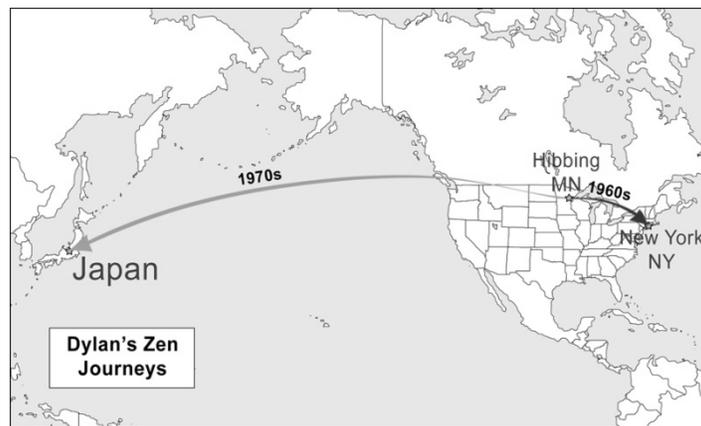
Dylan's initial exposure to Zen undoubtedly came through the auspices of poet and avowed meditator Allen Ginsberg, along with other Beat movement writers who were involved extensively with pursuing the Buddhist dharma either in their narrative writings, such as Jack Kerouac, or in their religious practice and poetry, such as Gary Snyder. Dylan befriended Ginsberg and read the works of other Beats when he first arrived and became ensconced in the bohemian scene that was flourishing in New York's Greenwich Village in the 1960s. For the members of the Beat movement, the appropriation of a Zen way of living freely in the eternal moment was considered a crucial component of their literary endeavors,

---

<sup>4</sup> See Michael J. Gilmour, *Tangled Up In the Bible: Bob Dylan and Scripture* (New York: Continuum, 2004); and Stephen H. Webb, *Dylan Redeemed: from Highway 61 to Saved*. (New York: Continuum, 2006); and Seth Rogonoy, *Prophet, Mystic, Poet* (New York: Scribner, 2009).

which expressed an obsessive search for individual freedom and spiritual truth beyond the conventions of modern, mechanical society.

As early as the mid-'60s, or over a decade before his travels to Japan, there were lyrics in a number of Dylan songs indicating the inception of a Zen-like outlook. These deal with the quest to find a haven of solitude and detachment in a world where the boundary between reality and illusion is continually breaking down with each act of social or personal injustice, hypocrisy, and inauthenticity. This spiritual longing is conveyed in songs such as "Chimes of Freedom," with its compassion for the misunderstood and downtrodden, "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)," which expresses a strict adherence to intellectual and cultural integrity and disdain for self-deception, and "Desolation Row," in which the aloofness of resignation and detachment seems to be the only answer for profound social ills.



**Two Journeys Leading to Zen**

In songs in which the Beat literary influence is particularly strong, Dylan seems to reflect the Zen attitude of "seeing things as they really are," by overcoming delusion and remaining free of blinders, distortions, or bad faith. Affinities with Zen also seem evident in lyrics that express a view of moral causality which resembles the Buddhist notion of karma. Several songs from *Blonde on Blonde* in 1966, including "Stuck Inside of Mobile with the Memphis Blues Again," "Visions of Johanna," and "4<sup>th</sup> Time Around," refer to the notion that "Everybody must give something back/For something they get." Another example of Zen inklings is the

cycle of songs on *The Basement Tapes* recorded in 1967 (released in 1975) that explore the implications of an experience of nothingness, or the spiritual void, in “Too Much of Nothing,” “Nothing Was Delivered,” and “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere.”

### The Village in Early '60s and Japan in Late '70s

Dylan’s possible interest in a Zen outlook was no doubt greatly enhanced by his travels in Japan a decade later. Dylan’s music gained popularity and a cult following in Japan beginning in the '60s when songs like “Blowin’ in the Wind” and “Like a Rolling Stone” were hit singles, and he became a role model for Japan’s student protest movement during the Vietnam War era.



Dylan '60s Record Jacket in Japan

Dylan’s arrival for the 1978 tour was eagerly anticipated and documented by scores of journalists. When he was asked at a press conference held at Haneda Airport why he had come to their country, Dylan told Japanese reporters rather playfully that it was because “we are living in a Zen age.”<sup>5</sup> Although Dylan sang unconventional arrangements of his

<sup>5</sup> Greeted with the newspaper headline “Bob Dylan has arrived!” (“Bobu Diran ga yatte-kita”), Dylan was also asked if he should be considered a “god of folk songs,” to which he responded, “no,” and when queried how he should be thought of, he replied, “I’m just a person.” Skeptics have seen the motive for the tour tied to a need for money to pay alimony after a

classic songs, accompanied for the first time in his career by a back-up band with sax, bongo drums, and distaff singers, the reception was very positive. A headline in an entertainment rag back in the states ran, “Dylan Zaps Japs.”

Upon leaving Japan at the conclusion of the tour, Dylan spoke fondly of the Zen temples he visited there, including Kinkakuji Temple (The Temple of the Golden Pavilion) and the most famous Zen rock garden located at Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto. Remarks on the cover of *Live at Budokan*, which was originally planned along with the greatest hits collection *Masterpieces* for a Japan-only release, mention his fascination with the teachings of Zen:

The Japanese people can hear my heart still beating in Kyoto at the Zen Rock Garden – Someday I will be back to reclaim it.



From '78 Far East/Budokan Tour Program

### Sitting Buddha versus Precious Angel

Dylan's “Zen garden,” a stage that included explicit references to Zen or Asian mysticism, was probably initially cultivated in 1974 on *Planet Waves*, which includes liner notes that evoke the image of Native American poets seeking a sense of the Buddha as part of their spiritual journey. The

---

difficult, contested divorce. See Naoki Urasawa and Koji Wakui, *Diran wo katarou: Talking About Bob Dylan* (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2007); and also see Mihashi Kazuo, *60 nendai no Bobu Diran* (Tokyo: Shinko Music Pub. Co., 1991).

album also contains the song “Dirge,” which says cryptically much like “Desolation Row”: “I paid the price of solitude, but at least I’m out of debt.” This implies that a Zen-like transcendence of ordinary attachments is worth the sacrifice of superficial companionship or seeking the approval of peers.

In an outtake version of “Idiot Wind” recorded for *Blood on the Tracks* a year later, Dylan explicitly evokes an ancient Asian religious text, the *I-Ching* (or *Book of Changes*), originally composed nearly three thousand years ago and translated many times into English. This scripture, which introduces the doctrine of the balance of opposing but complementary forces of Yin (yielding) and Yang (assertive), is known for its distinctive view of reconciling the conundrum of human choice versus fate determined by external powers through the doctrine of synchronicity, or the confluence of mutually determining factors that defy logical explanation. From this standpoint, there is no such thing as coincidence in the conventional sense of random, arbitrary occurrences because free will and destiny are interwoven possibilities in each and every action.

According to this version of “Idiot Wind,” “I threw the *I-Ching* yesterday, it said there might be some thunder at the well/I haven’t tasted peace an’ quiet for so long, it seems like livin’ hell.”<sup>6</sup> The reference to “thunder in the well” indicates the occasion of dramatic change or upheaval, and suggests that the consolation of solitude and quietude is not easily attained until the emotions of resentment and doubt are overcome. In addition, the final verse of an unofficial version of “Simple Twist of Fate” also recorded for *Blood on the Tracks*, concludes the anguished love song about missed opportunities amid the misfortunes of fateful circumstances by saying that the complex situation is “leaving me to meditate/One more time on a simple twist of fate.”<sup>7</sup> Here, fate implies the inescapability of inevitable circumstances that may cause turmoil or upheaval yet must be accepted with calm resignation.

---

<sup>6</sup> “The officially released version is, “I ran into the fortune-teller, who said beware of lightning that might strike/I haven’t known peace and quiet for so long I can’t remember what it’s like.” One wonders why he removed the Asian reference.

<sup>7</sup> The officially released version is, “She was born in spring, but I was born too late/Blame it on a simple twist of fate.”

In “Up to Me,” another song recorded for *Blood on the Tracks* but not included on the official release, Dylan cryptically downplays the typical Christian explanation of moral consequences based on the beatitudes, including the ideals of turning the other cheek and the meek inheriting the earth: “We heard the Sermon on the Mount and I knew it was too complex/It didn’t amount to anything more than what the broken glass reflects.” The broken glass image suggests the Zen view of embracing multiple, fractured perspectives as the best way of taking part in, yet remaining detached from, a fragmented and relativistic universe. The song indicates that the Asian outlook is more attuned to natural circumstances and, therefore, of equal weight or perhaps superior to the biblical account of morality.

Furthermore, a few months later in April 1975, Dylan did a radio interview with Mary Travers (of the renowned folk trio Peter, Paul, and Mary) in which he chided listeners like Travers who would say they “enjoyed” listening to *Blood on the Tracks*, because it reveals so much inner pain (she conceded that she meant to say “appreciated”). He also discussed with Travers that day how the Zen notion of time as an eternal present moment helped to inspire the revival of his artistry after a lull in his songwriting during the early ’70s. This period of composing was also influenced by Dylan’s painting teacher Norman Raeban.<sup>8</sup> Although Raeban, a descendant of famed Yiddish writer Shalom Aleichem, did not introduce Zen, he taught Dylan “a new way of seeing” based on a comprehensive scope that has affinities with Eastern mysticism. According to Dylan, this helped to spark his innovative approach to constructing narrative structures by integrating past and future vantage points with current perspectives.

In his next album, *Desire* released in 1976, explicit references to Buddhism come to the fore in the hit song “Hurricane.” Dylan ironically evokes the image of a Buddhist meditation hut, which is traditionally “ten-foot square” in honor of the abode of the humble lay saint Vimalakirti, who was said to have defeated Buddhist deities in a heavenly debate. This image conveys a sense of empathy for the listener with the plight of the unfairly imprisoned black boxer, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter: “Now all the criminals in their coats and their ties/Are free to drink martinis and watch the sun

---

<sup>8</sup> See Clinton Heylin, *Bob Dylan: Behind the Shades Revisited* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2000), pp. 368-369.

rise/While Rubin sits like Buddha in a ten-foot cell/An innocent man in a living hell.”

Carter was a rising prizefighter who “one time... could-a been/The [middleweight] champion of the world,” but who in the racially divided environment of Patterson, New Jersey in the 1960s was framed for a bloody murder he did not commit. Hurricane continued to contest and appeal his case through the legal system while he remained in prison for ten years after Dylan’s involvement in the cause, and he was eventually freed from jail in 1985 after serving nearly two decades. Some time later, he was awarded two honorary doctorate of law degrees from universities in Canada and Australia, and was celebrated in a film starring Denzel Washington.

In the song, Dylan’s first overt protest lyric in half a decade (since “George Jackson” recorded in 1970 about another apparently falsely accused black prisoner who died in jail), Hurricane becomes a kind of modern-day Zen hero. By turning incarceration into an opportunity for contemplation and purification in rising above all detractors and obstacles, Carter demonstrates the qualities of patience, fortitude, and equanimity coupled with self-assurance and self-assertiveness. Hurricane is said to summon his considerable inner strengths to become spiritually liberated from prolonged physical suffering due to blatant racism and social injustice. It is very interesting that Dylan chose to cast this issue in terms of Eastern imagery of meditative self-determination rather than the Western ideal of sacrificial martyrdom.

There are several lyrics in *Street Legal*, Dylan’s next album of original material released in 1978, the same year the live album was recorded in Japan, that contain references or allusions to Zen. In particular, a line in “We Better Talk This Over” cites one of the most famous of the enigmatic Zen koans, or succinct, unanswerable yet edifying spiritual riddles, regarding the difficulty of communicating intuitive awareness: “But I don’t think it’s liable to happen,” Dylan says, perhaps mockingly, about the possibility of reconciliation, “Like the sound of one hand clappin’.”

This album also contains songs influenced by the Mississippi Delta Blues tradition, which has greatly affected Dylan’s music-making throughout his career, including “New Pony,” a rewrite of a classic Charley Patton tune (“Pony Blues,” one of Patton’s biggest commercial hits in the late 1920s). *Street Legal* makes a couple of allusions to another great bluesman, Robert Johnson, in lines in “Where Are You Tonight?” about “the juice running down my leg” and about anxiety “killing me by degrees.” This highlights those songs of the itinerant, long-suffering early twentieth-

century American Blues singers in pursuit of redemption, which was crucial to the development of many subsequent forms of modern popular music, and bears striking affinities with the attitudes and spiritual poetry created by unconventional Zen pilgrims seeking their path in medieval East Asia.

Another lyric in that song, "There's a white diamond gloom on the dark side of this room and a pathway that leads up to the stars/If you don't believe there's a price for this sweet paradise/Remind me to show you the scars," evokes the classical mystical experience of enduring the "dark night of the soul" in order to find higher truth. This corresponds to the Zen notion of suffering, that is inextricably linked with the attainment of enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> In addition, this song's classic blues putdown of a foe, "It felt outa place, my foot in his face," sounds like a comparable Zen saying about dismissing a rival, "Why is his nose in my hands?"

However, a major transition in Dylan's religious orientation was about to happen with his new, or possibly revived, interest in Christianity. It turned out by the time of the release of *Street Legal* in the summer of 1978 that there was yet another twist of faith taking place, and that Dylan's Zen garden stage would be heading for a collision course with his rather abrupt conversion to fundamental Christian doctrine. The encounter and conflict between the two religious views came to a head in 1979 with the album *Slow Train Coming*, in which Dylan explicitly repudiates Buddhism as part of embracing a new belief, though some would argue he had long been involved with the gospel but was not aware of it. After finding a "Precious Angel" (reported to be one of his backup singers) who facilitated his born-again experience, Dylan chides the ecumenical interests apparently of his recently divorced wife Sara, who had perhaps helped to indoctrinate him to Eastern religiosity: "You were telling him about Buddha, you were telling him about Mohammed in the same breath/You never mentioned one time the Man who came and died a criminal's death."

With a Zen light shining on the sitting Buddha seemingly eclipsed and cast aside by the Christian angel's glow, one wonders whether Dylan's affinity with the East would tend to diminish and perhaps disappear altogether. However, the relation between the impact of Christianity, which Dylan seemed to have abandoned by the early '80s, and other spiritual

---

<sup>9</sup> In *Chronicles: Volume One* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2004), p. 288, Dylan associates this theme with Robert Johnson, and it is also connected with Arthur Rimbaud's "*Je est un autre*" or "I is someone else."

cultural worldviews remains complex and contested. One way to answer this question of whether or not Dylan may have lost an interest in Zen and Asian mysticism is that there are important indicators of his continued involvement with Japanese culture that have emerged over the three decades of the post-gospel period.

For example, in the early 1980s, the video of “Tight Connection to My Heart (Has Anybody Seen My Love)” was shot in Tokyo. Originally recorded for *Infidels* but released on *Empire Burlesque*, the song deals with the ambiguous image of an idealized, spiritual “Madame Butterfly.” As with so many of Dylan’s innovations, this proved to be years ahead of its time. The video’s extensive use of imagery from contemporary Japanese society presages other American pop cultural interests in the Orient, such as Gwen Stefani’s chorus known as the “Harajuku Girls” that rose to prominence over twenty years later, as well as Swedish pop icon Robyn’s “Konnichi wa.” Furthermore, during a tour of Japan in the early 1990s, outstanding performances of “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” and “Ring Them Bells” were delivered in an orchestral setting, unusual for Dylan, as part of the “Great Music Experiment” that was recorded in the ancient capital city of Nara.

A few years after this, at the turn of the millennium, the bestselling Japanese book *Confessions of a Yakuza* infused some of the lyrics of “*Love and Theft*”, especially “Lonesome Day Blues,” which also includes extensive references to the works of classical poet Ovid.<sup>10</sup> In addition, one of the verses from “Sugar Baby” sounds like a description of the notion of suffering (*dukkha*) that comes straight out of a traditional Buddhist text with its emphasis on overcoming self-deception coupled with disappointment and anxiety in relation to the flux of impermanence:

Every moment of existence seems like some dirty trick  
Happiness can come suddenly and leave just as quick  
Any minute of the day the bubble could burst  
Try to make things better for someone, sometimes,  
you just end up making it a thousand times worse.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Richard F. Thomas, “The Streets of Rome: The Classical Dylan,” *Oral Tradition* 22/1 (2007): 30-56.

### **Dylan's Career Trajectory as Swinging Pendulum**

The full extent of Dylan's involvement, direct or indirect, with Zen and other branches of Asian mystical thought is not clear, but must be acknowledged as rather limited in scope. How important, then, are affinities with Zen for understanding Dylan's work? Does it play a key role, or is it a veritable blip on the screen compared to other aspects that seem to have had a more dramatic affect on his religiosity? The factors of Western spirituality include Dylan's Jewish upbringing, conversion to Christianity that lasted for at least a few years, and fascination with diverse spiritual sources ranging from Blues music and Beat poetry, to the classics and the philosophy of Nietzsche; It also includes a wide variety of literary and cultural elements, especially from American folk music and the society it reflects yet seeks to transform.

The juxtaposition and sharp contrast between Dylan's appreciation of the Zen rock garden in Kyoto in 1978 and his reverence for Christ that was awakened less than a year later highlights the fact that there have always been two main worldviews, at times competing and at times complementary, in Dylan's mind. Stepping back from that particular time frame to survey his overall production of nearly half a century, it seems clear that many of the singer-songwriter's lyrics echo the Zen philosophy of seeking enlightenment through experiencing life's hardships, continually questioning assumptions and stereotypes, and searching within for reprieve and transcendence.

Various kinds of lyrical or intellectual affinities and indirect connections between Dylan and Zen have taken place throughout different periods of his career, and are by no means limited to the one rather compressed time-frame of the mid- to late-'70s (*Blood on the Tracks* through *Street Legal*). A Zen perspective seems to play a crucial, if frequently indirect, role at times of the disillusionment Dylan expressed in stages during the 1960s and the 1980s in addition to the 1970s. During these phases of his songwriting, Dylan rejected any and all symbols of authority that might obstruct his dedicated pursuit of authenticity and autonomy, which is realized during key moments of Zen-like detachment and compassion.

At the same time, there are songs in various career stages that reverberate with Judeo-Christian precepts of believing in a higher power, obeying moral codes, and submitting to judgment. Dylan's Judeo-Christian-oriented lyrics evoke a dualistic worldview in the sense that Duality refers to two competing forces, such as good and evil, or heaven and hell. The

Duality side is where Dylan is looking for a single higher power to offer solutions to personal and social dilemmas. The higher power provides justice or a sense of retribution for social ills for people that are not following the highest moral standards. In “When the Ships Come In,” for example, he writes, “Then the sands will roll/Out a carpet of gold/For your weary toes to be a-touchin’/And the ship’s wise men/Will remind you once again/That the whole wide world is watchin’.” This is a judgmental view dating back to the Old Testament prophets that Dylan has embraced in some periods of his career.

But in other songs, Dylan leans more toward the non-dualistic worldview of Zen Buddhism. The Non-Duality side is where Dylan sees that instead of one single truth that is making a judgment and offering retribution, there are multiple relativistic truths. In the world of the interaction of Yin and Yang forces, all contrasts, including the relation between reality and illusion, break down. A line from the final verse of “Tangled Up in Blue” in 1975, “All the people I used to know are an illusion to me now,” is an example of Dylan expressing resignation toward the relative, illusory world.

To sum up, the Duality worldview is based on a vertical, top-down sense of the universe in which a monolithic truth creates moral judgment and retribution. The Non-Duality worldview is based on a horizontal, side-by-side sense in which there is a plurality of truths that co-inhabit the universe in Yin/Yang fashion and are best dealt with through stoic acceptance and resignation. Both views make extensive use of paradoxical imagery. For example, a line in “The Times They are A-Changin’” from the early ’60s, “Rapidly fadin’/And the first one now/Will later be last,” is an example of vertical paradox in which opposites are conjoined but with a clear sense of priority (echoing Mark 10:31, “But many that are first shall be last; and the last first”). On the other hand, a lyric in “Silvio” from the mid-’80s, “I can stroke your body and relieve your pain/Since every pleasure’s got an edge of pain,” expresses horizontal paradox in which opposites are forever intertwined and are of equal value and weight.

Dylan’s emphasis has swung like a pendulum alternating between the two worldviews through his half a century as a recording artist (see the Appendix for a pendulum-like diagram illustrating the full flow of Dylan’s trajectory). During Dylan’s folk-protest era, 1963 to 1964, his lyrics often invoked themes of morality and justice. But during his folk-rock period, 1965 to 1967, Dylan’s work was more quixotic and searching. For example, in “Tombstone Blues” Dylan insists that excessive verbiage reflecting false

knowledge must be discarded: "Now I wish I could write you a melody so plain/That could hold you dear lady from going insane/That could ease you and cool you and cease the pain/Of your useless and pointless knowledge."

This is reminiscent of a Zen master, influenced by the Daoist view that it is necessary to unlearn and eventually forget conventional understanding, who comments: "The Dao is not subject to knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion; not knowing is blankness. If you truly reach the genuine Dao, you will find it as vast and boundless as outer space. How can this be discussed at the level of affirmation and negation?" Both Zen masters and Dylan use language in a special, deliberately perplexing way to go beyond ordinary knowing and speaking in order to reach what a medieval mystical text called the "cloud of unknowing." This state-of-mind reflects a kind of intuitive knowledge that surpasses conventional logic and understanding.

Following the dramatic shift that took place in the 1960s, Dylan's lyrics have continued to move back and forth between the Judeo-Christian and the Zen worldviews, the pendulum swings between idyllic family life (Duality) and the disappointment of separation (Non-Duality) in the 1970s, and an affirmation of the gospel (Duality) and frustration with this belief system (Non-Duality) in the 1980s. Dylan's process of exploring different spiritual paths corresponds to the manner in which Zen masters relentlessly seek a constructive compromise between two approaches: a dedicated commitment to self-discipline or self-reliance as the key to realization known as the path of Self Power; and a calm acceptance of fateful circumstances and divine forces operating beyond anyone's control known as the path of Other Power. Like Zen's approach to multiperspectivism based on "turning things upside down and topsy turvy," Dylan demonstrates an ability to hold in the mind disparate realities with a creative tension that brings out the best and does not interfere with both possibilities.

Therefore, in accord with Zen metaphysics that encompasses the productive interaction of contradictions along the way toward realizing a synthesis, an analysis can be applied to three main periods of Dylan's career. Extending from the early '60s through the '70s to the late '80s, each of the three main periods encompasses two seemingly opposite, pro-and-con stages either supporting or refuting an ideological standpoint of Duality or Non-Duality. That is, each period contains a Yang or assertive phase that puts forward a viewpoint favoring Duality which is followed by a Yin or withdrawn phase that tends to unravel and negate the single higher truth of

dualism from the opposing standpoint of the relative, complementary truths of Non-Duality. The three periods include:

(1) Period I: From ‘Protesting’ to ‘Detesting’ (1962-1967) – the first very intense outburst of Dylan’s creativity is at first dominated by topical protest songs in an acoustic folk style (Duality), and ends with songs of disdainful disillusionment about the capacity of music to change a world filled with hypocrisy and corruption played in the electric, folk-rock style (Non-Duality).

(2) Period II: From ‘I’ll Be Your Baby’ to ‘You’re an Idiot, Babe’ (1967-1979) – following Dylan’s motorcycle accident and marriage in the mid-’60s, the stage of country music affirms a wholehearted commitment to family values over social concerns (Duality), but culminates in a despairing account of being disillusioned and discouraged with all manner of human relationships in the aftermath of the Vietnam and Watergate (Non-Duality).

(3) Period III: From ‘Serving Somebody’ to ‘Letting the Echo Decide’ (1979-1988) – following Dylan’s divorce and the relative lack of success of several creative ventures, this period begins with gospel music expressing Dylan’s conversion to fundamental Christianity (Duality), and concludes with an apparent disillusionment with all theological answers and an awareness and openness to accepting relative truths (Non-Duality).

The zigzag quality lasted, I suggest, until the late 1980s when Dylan began to find a middle path, or a constructive compromise between the extremes. The career trajectory leads finally to the current “Modern Era,” which is how I refer to the creative resurgence marking the music from the ’90s to the present and reaching a middle way which integrates the oppositions that dominated the previous three periods. This was first suggested by the song “Man in the Long Black Coat,” which juxtaposes two verses, one commenting dualistically that “every man’s conscience is vile and depraved” with the following verse remarking non-dualistically that “people don’t live or die, people just float.”

In subsequent albums, especially *Time Out of Mind*, “*Love and Theft*”, and *Modern Times*, he has continued to place side-by-side the

respective standpoints and seems comfortable with their compatibility. Thus, during the most recent phase of his work that has lasted for two decades, Dylan has developed an approach demonstrating that East versus West as well as Duality versus Non-Duality are not always polarized as alternating opposites or engaged in a standoff, but can be linked together as mutually enhancing cross-cultural possibilities of the ongoing spiritual quest. According to a verse in "Nettie Moore," a song about a vengeful yet regretful lover, "The Judge is coming in, everybody rise/Lift up your eyes/You can do what you please, you don't need my advice/Before you call me any dirty names you better think twice." The first two lines evoke dualism, but the final part of the passage suggests the chaos of fragmented approaches to truth.

### **Are Birds Free?**

Dylan's work has demonstrated a remarkable variability that is reflected in his ability to make the most of a rich variety of genres from blues to rock, country, and gospel that reveal fundamental inconsistencies from the early to the late periods of his career. The genres include personal romantic narratives with profound social significance, such as "Visions of Johanna" or "Tangled Up in Blue"; topical, state-of-the-union message statements, such as "Desolation Row," "Slow Train," or "Political World"; apocalyptic pronouncements, as in "Shooting Star" or asking whether this is "Lincoln County Road or Armageddon?" in "Senor"; barbed-wire fence-straddling howls of desperation, such as "Can You Please Crawl Out My Window" and "Cold Irons Bound"; and confessional, repentant anthems, such as "Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest," "I Believe in You," and "Not Dark Yet." Underlying these thematic approaches is the ever mysterious presence of Dylan taking on the guise of the Drifter, Alias, Jack of Hearts, Jokerman, Man in the Long Black Coat, or Jack Fate. Accepting chaos while wondering if chaos will ever accept him and remaining busy being born rather than busy dyin', Dylan finds shelters from the storm... most of the time.

While it is important to acknowledge and appreciate diverse Western influences, sacred as well as secular, the main theme of this article is to swing the pendulum, so to speak, by highlighting the spiritual significance of enigmatic Dylan seen in relation to the equally elusive and ambiguous utterances and mannerisms of traditional Zen Buddhism. This is done not to assert the superior impact of Zen, but to help to locate and interpret the fulcrum or leverage point that is crucial for understanding the

crisscross paths of dualist and non-dualist worldviews in Dylan's career. The point is that Dylan's affinity with Zen is not limited to certain periods but cuts across all phases in reflecting the ongoing quest to uphold authenticity and autonomy in a world characterized by the absurdity of disruptive turmoil and petty conflict.

Traditional Zen thought was generally expressed in the "sparse words" of minimalist yet evocative verse, often accompanied by eccentric gestures or body language as well as other forms of creative expression. Zen masters sought to attain liberation from bondage to inhibiting psychological and social structures in pursuit of spiritual freedom, regardless of ideology. Their teachings, preserved in the voluminous records of medieval Chinese and Japanese literary culture, remain alive today in part by contributing to modern interfaith and cross-cultural exchanges regarding diverse paths to spiritual realization. The inventive philosophical queries and commentaries of Zen discourse in particular had a strong impact on the New York bohemian environment of the 1960s, as evident in the extensive role they played in the life and works of Beat writers, and also bear a striking similarity to Dylan's corpus.

Dylan's work seems Zen-like in puzzling passages about impenetrable states of consciousness like, "She knows there's no success like failure, and that failure's no success at all," "I need a dump truck mama to unload my head," and "You know it blows right through me like a ball and chain." In addition, there are quixotic queries influenced by Pete Seeger's "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?", such as "How many times must a man look up/Before he can see the sky?", "Where have you been, my blue-eyed son?" (following the traditional "Lord Randall"), and "[Did] I ever become what you wanted me to be/Did I miss the mark or/Over-step the line/That only you could see?" These recall the classic examples of seemingly unanswerable Zen questions known as koans, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" and "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

Both Dylan and Zen demonstrate an ability to use language creatively while remaining cognizant of the limitations of verbal discourse in order to convey the heights and horizons, as well as the depths and defeats, of an inner dimension of spirituality characterized by self-reflection and self-correction. Zen frequently depicts a damned-if-you-do and damned-if-you-don't situation with seemingly absurd examples like holding up a container and demanding of a disciple, "Tell me what this is without calling it a water pitcher and without not calling it a water pitcher. Tell me!"

Zen's "wild and extraordinary" discourse resonates with Dylan's marvelous and haunting inquiry – a true modern-day Zen koan – into the realm and limit of freedom in the concluding (yet inconclusive) verse of "Ballad in Plain D." After bemoaning the loss of someone he genuinely loved through tragic circumstances of betrayal and arrogance, the song's narrator responds to his "friends in the prison", metaphorically speaking, who ask "how good does it feel to be free", by questioning them "so mysteriously": "Are birds free from the chains of the skyway?"

When the capacity of language to express truth is exhausted, Zen masters evoke the importance of maintaining a noble silence, and when asked about its meaning they often remain "silent about silence," lest speech corrupts the contemplative moment. Dylan similarly recognizes the value of no-words when he comments in the *Bringing It All Back Home* liner notes that "experience teaches that silence terrifies people the most." He sees that silence is a useful and sometimes necessary tool to put an end to the blowing of the "Idiot Wind," and to rouse listeners from their spiritual or ideological slumber.

Yet, Dylan and Zen masters are well aware of the limitations of reticence that make it necessary to abandon a reliance on silence if it is used in a stubborn, withdrawn way and to speak up out of moral outrage or to express social criticism. Dylan has said, "I used to care/But things have changed," implying a reluctance to get involved and ensnared in the strife and struggles of the world. Underlying or complementing this detachment is a genuine compassionate concern and commitment for the well-being of self and others. Knowing when to be reticent and when to be proactive in articulating a vision or demanding moral rectitude is an important skill and domain of responsibility taken on by the spiritual master. For Dylan, the Delta Blues musical genre of Patton and Johnson has long been the primary venue that enables forceful yet frequently ambiguous, quixotic expressions of concern in a way that resembles the elusive, probing quality Zen Buddhist koans and verse.

### **Every Blade of Grass is Numbered**

There are additional significant similarities between Zen masters and Dylan in their respective dual roles as mystical seekers and recluses, as well as prophets and social critics. Zen became prominent as a medieval Buddhist monastic tradition in which the leading patriarchs attained the heights of spiritual liberation but remained keenly aware of the ambiguities, struggles, and tensions that continue to plague the religious path. Thirteenth

century Japanese Zen master Dogen referred to attaining truth as a matter of “disentangling entangled vines,” which can never be fully straightened out. In a parallel way, Bob Dylan is a poetic singer “still searching for another joint” as “revolution is in the air,” who glimpses freedom now and again while “knockin’ on heaven’s door,” but keeps wondering “If I could only turn back the clock to when God and her were born.” Zen and Dylan take paradox and irony to the level of an art form in seeking to find truth amid the entanglements and distractions of illusory existence.

A fascinating comparison between the two approaches is seen by examining Dogen’s majestic philosophical/poetic essay titled *Shōbōgenzō* “Genjokoan,” which can be translated as “Realizing Enlightenment in Everyday Life.”<sup>11</sup> The opening passage describes the need to reconcile the duality of form or phenomena, that is, daily existence, with emptiness or the manifestation of enlightenment. After delineating the overcoming of polarities such as delusion and realization, life and death, or sentient beings and buddhas, Dogen remarks, “Weeds still spring up to our dismay and flowers still fall to our chagrin.” He thereby acknowledges the continuing presence of *samsara* or the frailty of impermanence, and the causal effects of desire and aversion that exist within the efforts to realize the transcendence of nirvana. To put it in Western terms, heaven and hell are never so far apart.

In his hymn “Every Grain of Sand” about the “time of my confession, in the hour of my deepest need,” Dylan uses the symbolism of flowers and weeds to comment inspirationally on the inner struggle to come to terms with the impact of karma on spiritual life: “The flowers of indulgence and the weeds of yesteryear/Like criminals they have choked the breath of conscience and good cheer.” For Dogen in “Genjokoan,” these flowers fade while weeds proliferate even as the Buddha Way “leaps clear of abundance and scarcity” and of all polarity. Dylan, who perhaps had Mark 4:13 in mind, suggests that the indulgent flowers and karmic weeds are obstacles, even as he hears “ancient footsteps like the motion of the sea” and is “hanging in the balance of the reality of man.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> For more on the comparison of Dylan and Dogen, see Steven Heine and Taigen Dan Leighton, “Dylan and Dogen: Masters of Spirit and Words,” *Kyoto Journal* 39 (1999): 4-11.

<sup>12</sup> An alternative version to the last phrase in some Dylan performances is, “perfect finished plan.”

Dylan proclaims that “every hair is numbered, like every grain of sand.” This emphasis on each and every particular element is no doubt influenced by biblical teaching such as Psalm 139:17-18, as well as Matthew 10:28-31 and Luke 12:6-7, but also recalls the William Blake stanza at the beginning of *Songs of Innocence* published in the early 1800s: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand/And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/Hold Infinity I the palm of your hand/And Eternity in an hour.” Despite the biblical background they evoke, the writings of both Blake and Dylan are similar to Dogen's poem composed on the occasion of his return from the remote mountains of Eiheiiji temple in the provinces to the capital city of Kyoto to seek medical care shortly before his death. According to the last verse Dogen composed in 1253, which in turn reminds us of the opening lines of Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, “Like a blade of grass/My frail body/Treading the path to Kyoto/Seeming to wander/Amid the cloudy mist on Kinobe Pass.”<sup>13</sup>

Here and elsewhere, while influenced by Western religious and literary sources, Dylan's work seems to approach the Zen worldview, which finds liberation through recognizing and resigning to, rather than denying, the transient world characterized by illusion and self-doubt. Dylan emphasizes transforming bad-faith perspectives into wisdom that accepts disillusionment through detachment. Some prominent examples include:

- “I try my best/To be just like I am/But everybody wants you/To be just like them/They sing while you slave and I just get bored” (“Maggie's Farm”, 1965).
- “Everybody said they'd stand behind me/When the game got rough/But the joke was on me/There was nobody even there to call my bluff/I'm going back to New York City/I do believe I've had enough” (“Just Like Tom Thumb's Blues,” 1965).
- “Life is sad/Life is a bust/All ya can do is do what you must./ You do what you must do and ya do it well” (“Buckets of Rain,” 1975).

---

<sup>13</sup> Steven Heine, trans., *The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace* (Mt. Tremper, NY: Dharma Communications, 2005), p. 106.

- “So many roads, so much at stake/So many dead ends, I’m at the edge of the lake/Sometimes I wonder what it’s gonna take/To find dignity” (“Dignity,” 1989).
- “Standing on the gallows with my head in a noose/Any minute now I’m expecting all hell to break loose/People are crazy and times are strange/I’m locked in tight, I’m out of range/I used to care, but things have changed” (“Things Have Changed,” 1999).

In a comparable expression of a creative seeker who longs for the authenticity of the inexpressible haven of solitude amid a world of rank uncertainty and ambiguity, fifth century Chinese Daoist poet Tao Qian, an important precursor of Zen verse, wrote “Drinking Wine,” which has a contemporary resonance:

I made my home amidst this human bustle,  
 Yet I hear no clamor from the carts and horses.  
 My friend, you ask me how this can be so?  
 A distant heart will tend towards like places.  
 From the eastern hedge, I pluck chrysanthemum flowers,  
 And idly look towards the southern hills.  
 The mountain air is beautiful day and night,  
 The birds fly back to roost with one another.  
 I know that this must have some deeper meaning,  
 I try to explain, but cannot find the words.

Dylan further resembles Zen when he embraces a relativist worldview that is resigned to the delusory status of everyday concerns, as expressed in a lyric from “Not Dark Yet,” “I’ve been down on the bottom of a world full of lies/I ain’t looking for nothing in anyone’s eyes.” Similarly, in “Genjokoan” Dogen invokes the sense of ultimate awareness as dynamic and evolving yet always somehow incomplete and in need of renewal: “When dharma [Buddhist truth] does not fill your whole body and mind, you think it is already sufficient. When dharma does fill your body and mind, you understand that something is missing.” This paradoxical irony further resembles Dylan’s song, “Trying to Get to Heaven,” which includes a line about emotional loss that also plays with the tension in the ultimate casting off of illusion that comes with spiritual insight. Dylan says, “Just when you think you’ve lost everything, you find out you can always

lo-o-o-o-ose a little more,” crooning “lose,” sung low over a few extra measures for added emphasis.

One of the most important aspects of the worldview of Zen, known for its exquisite rock gardens, calligraphy, tea ceremony, and other forms of art and ritual, is that it seeks to go beyond pessimism by affirming the frail beauty of concrete reality while recognizing and accepting transience and relativism. According to a Zen verse, “To what shall I liken the world/Moonlight, reflected in dewdrops/Shaken from a crane’s bill.” Beauty, generally associated with the forms of nature in Zen, is appreciated all the more for being ephemeral and frail.

Furthermore, as an expression of their mystical vision, Dylan and Zen both speak poetically with paradoxical phrasing about the true wisdom embedded in the harmonious world of nature. In an early masterpiece, “Lay Down Your Weary Tune,” Dylan sings, “The ocean wild like an organ played/The seaweed wove its strands/The crashing waves like cymbals clashed/Against the rocks and sands.” As Dylan personifies the music-making of waters, Dogen speaks of the omnipresence of flowing water and also of the phantasmagoria of the walking of mountains in his evocative essay, *Shōbōgenzō* “Sansuikyo” (“The Sutras of Mountains and Waters”). He concludes, “There are mountains hidden in the sky. There are mountains hidden in mountains. There are mountains hidden in hiddenness. This is complete understanding.” For Dylan in his song as for Dogen in his philosophical works, the natural elements are not only symbols or mirrors for behavior, but are very much alive as powerful spiritual guides that can enhance or hinder the path.

This further recalls a variety of Dylan songs from periods of disillusionment in which he expresses a profound appreciation for nature while acknowledging the pathos of human relations that defies placing it on a pedestal as an eternal godlike image. In “When the Deal Goes Down,” Dylan writes, “In this earthly domain, full of disappointment and pain/You’ll never see me frown,” and in “Highlands,” “Well, my heart’s in the Highlands at the break of day/Over the hills and far away/There’s a way to get there, and I’ll figure it out somehow/But I’m already there in my mind/And that’s good enough for now.” To see the twin aspects of absurdity and tragedy for what they are and to at once protest and detest human foibles while calmly standing back and distancing oneself is the quality that links Dylan and Zen. Is Dylan a Zen master? The question itself provides the answer to the question.