Gnosis and Other Poems of Union With the Absolute: Part Two

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This essay will continue the treatment of poems originating in the gnostic Christian and Islamic traditions, which flourished in South Asia and the Middle East, and compare their salient features to poems arising from the Taoist/Zen traditions in China and Japan. The generalizations suggested in this essay should not be interpreted to mean that either the gnostic or Zen heritage is in any sense monolithic, as indeed the opposite point was stressed regarding the commonalities between poetry emerging from these practices that are unlikely to have had any but remote historical cross-fertilization. Therefore, one interesting inference one might make from studies such as these is that there must be at some deeper level a kind of universal, though rare human experience regarded by these unique individuals to be a kind of "communion with the Absolute." The precise origins of these experiences is a matter for fascinating speculation, but they do not need to be an aspect of a literary or for that matter even, a psychological inquiry. In this brief study, the focus is primarily on the common features, as well as some differences, of poems that aim to express such experiences.

In Part One of this study, the following features were observed in the poems selected for analysis: a tendency to reject traditional ways of thinking and believing, especially traditional religious tenets, scriptures and rituals; an emphasis on knowledge as personal and experiential rather than of an intellectual or academic nature; a tendency to treat the acquisition of knowledge and life itself in a down-to-earth, practical and highly sensory manner; an ecstatic realization of an inner spiritual core existing within the poet; finally, the identification of this inner ecstatic knowledge with that of the self. These are by no means the only features one could fruitfully explore in the poems of gnosis but these are more than sufficient for a study of limited scope. Furthermore, since the poems we will look at are being examined in English translations from the original language, we will avoid commenting on poetic form and word play, and concentrate instead on the content, of which feeling is paramount; however, this does not imply that philosophical and other kinds of conceptualizations are by any means absent.

First, by way of background, we might glance at a number of so-called "enlightenment" verses from poets identified with the Zen tradition. The advantage of this approach is that it avoids any abstract, academic commentary on satori that seems both pretentious and necessarily short of the mark. We hear the words straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak, of the experiences as they have been expressed in poetic texts. There should be no illusion whatsoever
that this is the same or in any way similar to the actual experience. (Indeed, for this writer, the
experiences of the poetic texts are sufficient rewards, and they don’t require a single minute of
zazen!) Allied closely to the enlightenment verses are the “death” poems commonly written by
poets of the Zen persuasion or association. We will begin with the death poem of probably the
most profound of all the Japanese commentators on Buddhism, Dogen (1200-53):

Four and fifty years
I’ve hung the sky with stars.
Now I leap through—
What shattering! (Stryck & Ikemoto 18)

(Poems quoted from Stryck and Ikemoto are taken from Zen Poetry unless noted otherwise.)
This seems indeed to have much of ecstatic tone of a Kabir (1398-1518) writing in his own
Islamic/Hindu tradition. We might compare the following:

There is a Secret One inside us;
the planets in all the galaxies
pass through his hands like beads. (Bly 29)

In the example above, Kabir refers to the divinity inside each man, which also encompasses the
universe. In the next excerpt he uses one of his favorite metaphors for the divine presence—the
Great Sound:

So plunge into the truth, find out who the Teacher is,
Believe in the Great Sound! (Bly 24)

And finally we have Kabir on death:

Kabir says: My desire-body is dying, and it lives! (Bly 52)

Returning now to the death poem of Fumon (1302-69):

Magnificent! Magnificent!
No one knows the final word.
The ocean bed’s aflame,
Out of the void leap wooden lambs. (Stryck & Ikemoto 19)

In all of the poems above, we find an ecstatic mood, in several instances, even in the face

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of death. The death poem by Fumon gives us a glimpse of the seemingly surrealist imagery that is also often found in other Zen poems, as well as in poems of *gnosis*. However, I believe one should make some distinctions between the kind of disjunctive and fanciful imagery we can see in such poems and the surrealism of the modern and postmodern Western poetry, and we shall return to this later in Part Three of this tri-part study.

A well-known feature of Zen training is the use of the *koan*, which is erroneously thought of in Western terms as a kind of surrealist puzzle that the Zen seeker must in some clever way come to terms with. For example, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” is probably the best known *koan* in the West. In fact the use of the *koan* is a means of forcing the student out of confining, rational modes of thought into a realm of a direct perception of reality. It is interesting to note that Sufi masters also posed paradoxical riddles to try to free their disciples from the confining realms of language-governed, rational thought processes. Many of these are indeed quite similar to the Zen *koan*, and some of them are nearly identical. The following commentary will provide some additional background and a few examples:

Besides his more obvious teachings, Kabir sometimes poses (seemingly) illogical riddles to his audience (e.g., A child was born before the mother’s birth, the Guru is touching the feet of the disciple, the fish are swinging on the trees, or the lion is riding the waves of the ocean), challenging them to find a solution. In my opinion, these riddles do not necessarily have any solutions or meaning per se, but, perhaps, are intended to draw us into a deepened state of introspection. They may make one question the direction of flow of time. They may enable us to experience the ability of the human mind to create any reality. Or, they may make one realize suddenly that the flow-based creativity within us is like a fish. In my limited experience, the meaning of these riddles or words is exactly and precisely the experience they generate within us, and it is futile and even counterproductive to look for the right answer.

(Maalok; http://www.boloji.com/kabir/mysticsongs/index.htm)

We might refer to a famous verse from Ikkyu, as follows:

Hearing a crow with no mouth
Cry in the deep
Darkness of the night,
I feel a longing for
My father before he was born. (Shigematsu from Berg 17)

Of course, since many *koan* are expressed in verse forms of various kinds, as in the example above, there is a direct link to this tradition and the kind of poems we are examining here.
Ikkyu quite often refers to koan directly, sometimes seriously, other times disparagingly. In the following poem he applies the koan to the Zen focus on the Self:

only one koan matters
you (Berg 67)

At this point we might look some more at the poems of Ikkyu Sojun (1394-1481), whose eccentric and iconoclastic poems were matched by his extravagant rejection of the mores of his time. Indeed, his greatest contempt seemed to be directed at traditional Buddhist rituals and practices. He wrote this line on the subject of his satori:

one of you saved my satori paper I know it piece by piece
you
pasted it back together now watch me burn it once and for
all (Berg 13)

Or:
that stone Buddha deserves all the birdshit it gets
I wave my skinny arms like a tall flower in the wind (Berg 26)

For a similar attitude we can turn to the great Turkish Sufi poet, Hafiz (Shams-ud-din Muhammad, 1320-89):

STOP BEING SO RELIGIOUS

What
Do sad people have in
Common?

It seems
They have all built a shrine
To the past

And often go there
And do a strange wail and
Worship.

What is the beginning of
Happiness?

It is to stop being

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So religious

Like

That. (Ladinsky 119)

Probably the most common association with Buddhism is the concept/nonconcept of nothingness. It is less well-known that a very similar notion permeates the teachings of the Sufis, as we can see from this poem by the Afghan Sufi, Rumi (Jeluddin Balki, 1207-73):

THIS WORLD WHICH IS MADE OF
OUR LOVE FOR EMPTINESS

Praise to the emptiness that blanks out existence. Existence:
this place made from our love for that emptiness!
Yet somehow comes emptiness,
this existence goes.
Praise to that happening, over and over!

For years I pulled my own existence out of emptiness.
Then one swoop, one swing of the arm,
that work was over.
Free of who I was, free of presence, free of
dangerous fear, hope,
free of mountainous wanting.

The here-and-now mountain is a tiny piece of a piece
of straw
blown off into emptiness.

These words I’m saying so much begin to lose meaning:
existence, emptiness, mountain, straw: words
and what they try to say swept
out the window, down the slant of the roof. (Barks 21-22)

Zen poems on nothingness abound, but for the sake of comparison, I include this short verse from Kiyo (8th century):

For eighty years I’ve talked of east and west:
What nonsense. What’s long/short? big/small?
There’s no need of the gray old man, I’m one

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With all of you, in everything. Once through
The emptiness of all, who’s coming? Who going?
(Stryck & Ikemoto, 1973 21)

Another quite direct comment on nothingness comes from Saisho (?-1506):

Earth, mountains, rivers—hidden in this nothingness.
In this nothingness—earth, mountains, rivers revealed.
Spring flowers, winter snows:
There’s no being nor non-being, nor denial itself.
(Stryck & Ikemoto 74)

And from Ikkyu on nothingness:

mirror facing a mirror
nowhere else (Berg 30)
even before trees rocks I was nothing
when I’m dead nowhere I’ll be nothing (Berg 19)

Yet Ikkyu’s most radical behavior, even for Zen monks famous for their lack of conformity to conventional mores, was his disregard for sexual taboos. He wrote numerous poems about his love affair with the young blind woman Shin (森 in Japanese, the letter also pronounced as [mori]), who was about forty years younger. Here a few of the mildest of these:

I love taking my new girl blind Mori on a spring picnic
I love seeing her exquisite free face its moist sexual heat
shine (Berg 10)

for us no difference between reading eating singing
making love not one thing or the other (Berg 64)

As stated before, these examples are among the milder expressions of Ikkyu’s belief in and practice of free love long before it became fashionable, and his total grounding in the everyday physical life of the senses. Unlike the Sufi mystics, whose sensuality was always linked, at least metaphorically, to the passionate love of God, Ikkyu betrays no such mystical leanings. Yet this is the very paradox that, to a layperson, lies at the heart of Zen. Zen satori is reported by Zen practitioners to be both a release from, yet a complete resignation to the reality of life and death, and in theory, to the lack of such distinctions.
To this latter point, of course, the Sufi Gnostics would agree. Both the Sufis and an enlightened Zen master often affirm that life and death are merely different phases of union with the Absolute, though they may not concur about what the Absolute actually is or even what it connotes. This is not to say that Ikkyu’s most outrageous behavior was universally condoned, even in his time, but no one could deny that his complete disregard for conventions and the opinions of about him were consistent with the Zen perspective of “emptiness,” and non-duality, including the contrasting pairs of “Heaven and Hell,” “good and evil, “right and wrong,” and especially, “life and death.” Furthermore, his fierce practice of freedom from artificial codes is part of his legend and charm. Nonetheless, he himself is capable of shame and guilt and he sometimes reproaches himself for his own behavior while at the same time acknowledging he will never change and at times seeming to exult in his “wickedness.”

sin like a madman until you can’t do anything else
no room for any more (Berg 21)

Yet despite this flagrant disregard for the pieties and pretenses of his profession and contemporary mores, he can also write the following:

I try to be a good man but all that comes
of trying is I feel more guilty (Berg 31)

And also:

I’m pure shame
what I do and what I say never the same (Berg 29)

On the specific topic of his lust for women:

if you don’t break rules you’re an ass not human
women start us passion comes and goes until death (Berg 63)

I suspect that like Emerson and Huxley, Ikkyu too thought that consistency was the “hobgoblin of trivial minds.” I think that, with all their delicacy, the Sufis would agree with this observation, (though perhaps not with his conduct) and often do so humorously. No stick-in-the-mud could write the following verse we find in the work of the great Turkish Sufi, Hafiz (Shams-ud-din Muhammad, 1320-89):

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WHAT THE HELL

The
Real Love.
I always keep a secret.

All my words
Are sung outside Her window,

For when She lets me in
I take a thousand oaths of silence.

But,
Then She says,

O, then God says,

“What the hell, Hafiz,
Why not give the whole world
My
Address.” (Ladinsky 61)

On a fine point that enhances the irony and ambiguity of the above poem, it is unclear whether or not “She” is saying that God says..., or conversely, “She” is actually meant to be “God” in the poem, as in “She says—O, then God says—in which the speaker is clarifying the reference and the address being proffered then becomes God’s and not just the woman of his amorous attention, however metaphorically even this reference is intended. Of course we are supposed to understand anyway that Hafiz and other Sufi poets often refer to God as if He/She were a lover—sometimes male, and sometimes female. We have seen earlier that Kabir tended to write as if he were a female making love to a God, who was conceptualized as a male lover, but certainly the Sufis were equal-opportunity lovers.

From the Afghan/Persian Sufi, Rumi (Jelluddin Balki, 1207-73), we have many examples of the motifs we have been discussing, often mixed in the same poem: poems that speak of joy and delight in the sensory world, but nonetheless merge the sensory, the sexual and the spiritual into indistinguishable moments of ecstasy:

They try to say what you are, spiritual or sexual?
They wonder about Solomon and all his wives.

In the body of the world, they say, there is a soul
and you are that.
But we have ways within each other
that will never be said by anyone. (Barks 37)

Now let’s look at another example that treats a similar topic from the Afghan/Persian Sufi, Rumi (Jeluddin Balki, 1207-73):

The Lovers
will drink wine night and day.
They will drink until they can
tear away the veils of intellect and
melt away the layers of shame and modesty.
When in Love,
body, mind, heart and soul don’t even exist.
Become this,
fall in Love,
and you will not be separated again.

(Rumi Network, Shahram Shiva; http://www.rumi.net/rumi_by_shiva.htm)

Another commonality between the Sufi Gnostic poets and the Zen tradition is the recurrent motif that truth can only be found within the self. We have seen several examples of this in Part One in the poems of Kabir. Although in the case of the Sufis it seems clear that the self is merely the route to communion/union with some other divine Energy or Presence—the Lover, the Guest, or the Friend—the nature of truth to an enlightened Zennist is not this clear. Here again we end in paradox, despite numerous expressions that assert that everything—that is, nothing—lies within the seeker, the poems expressing the satori experience repeatedly invoke imagery of another realm, another consciousness, symbolized by the stars, the galaxies, breaking through, shattering, etc. Recall Dogen’s death poem, cited earlier, which refers to his “leaping through.” Since poems are confined to words, they necessarily evoke metaphoric links to the world we live in to some other realm of existence/nonexistence.

Looking at Ikkyu’s poems we find, even in the doubtlessly impoverished version of a translation, simplicity that is at times seemingly flippant, at other times quite moving. We find examples of both below. The first, on the topic of a child (whose mother is thought to be Shin):

watching my four-year-old daughter dance
I can’t break free of her (Berg 60)

Again the motif of the koon is merged with the most commonplace of attachments:
sexual love’s attachment pain is deeper than I can know
wind soothes my thoughts this lust my ceaseless koan
impossibly happy (Berg 20)

And there are those crude yet sentimental personifications of nature:

it takes horseshit to grow bamboo
and it too longs forever weeps begs to the wind (Berg 47)

Despite the eccentricities of Ikkyu’s poems, they do share with the Gnostics a number of deeply rooted similarities, such as finding truth/love within the self:

you can’t be anyone but you
therefore you are that Other one you love (Berg 29)

Again we find in Ikkyu many perspectives on the reality/unreality of death:

if there’s nowhere to rest at the end
how can I get lost on the way? (Berg 19)

I won’t die I won’t go away I’ll always be here
no good asking me I won’t speak (Berg 26)

here I am simply trying to get into your head
you think you were born you die what a pity (Berg 24)

you poor sad thing thinking death is real
all by itself (Berg 26)

But there also are the laments of the heart:

one long pure beautiful road of pain
and the beauty of death and no pain (Berg 24)

long life
the wild pines want it too (Berg 36)

and what is the heart
pine breeze voice in a forgotten painting (Berg 70)
Moments of celebration as well:

I'm in it everywhere
what a miracle trees lakes clouds even dust (Berg 27)
nobody knows I'm a storm I'm
dawn on the mountain twilight on the town (Berg 73)

And childlike delight, like that of the Sufis, in simple sensory pleasures:

I hate it I know it's nothing but I
suck out the world's sweet juicy plum (Berg 36)

We have numerous examples of the poems from both the Zen and Sufi traditions that clearly share some affinities, and of course some stark distinctions. Especially with Ikkyu, perhaps, the poems seem harder, earthier, and much darker in tone than the consistently euphoric messages of the Sufis. Yet Ikkyu and other Zen poets too are often full of life, joyous and in celebration.

From Ikkyu:

VOID IN FORM

When, just as they are,
White dewdrops gather
On scarlet maple leaves,
Regard the scarlet beads! (Stryck & Ikemoto 72)

And this example from Nensho (1409-82):

Only genuine awakening results in that.
Only fools seek sainthood for reward.
Lifting a hand, the stone lantern announces daybreak.
Smiling, the void nods its enormous head. (Stryck & Ikemoto 74)

And now from Bunan (1602-79)

When you're both alive and dead,
Thoroughly dead to yourself,
How superb
The smallest pleasure! (Stryck & Ikemoto 76)

We could fill many more pages with examples from the Chinese and Japanese Zen tradition, but I hope the important points have been made from these, which have been selected from a vast canon of poetic works. We have seen striking parallels from the Zen and Sufi traditions, but we would be overstating the case if we did not touch briefly upon the distinctions. As Daisetz Suzuki points out in *Zen and Japanese Culture*, the Zen way of seeing arose from the pragmatic tendency of the Chinese, who adapted the more abstract and philosophical Buddhism of India to an earthier, more practical view of the world and every day life. Zen, and its close kin, Taoism, arose from this clash of national differences in philosophical and religious temperament. On the other hand, as the great Indian heritage of Buddhism and Hinduism moved westward toward the Persian and the Arabian cultures, much of its lofty yet sensuous sensibilities found a welcome reception in the Judaic-Christian-Islamic civilizations, and particularly in those blessed with religious genius—the great Christian and Islamic mystics we have referred to in previous pages. The branching in different directions, both literally and philosophically, of Indian Buddhism, may in part explain the softer, lofter, more conventionally “poetic” tone of the Sufi poets, when compared to the hard-boiled, plain talk of Ikkyu and many of his Zen brethren.

But I would be remise if I did not also note the monotheistic tradition of the Judaic-Christian-Islamic religions, although monotheism preceded even these in 6th century B.C. Persian Zoroastrianism, from which some of the most ancient Sufi concepts found their roots. Monotheism is based on a belief in One God, and in some form or another God is conceptualized as an Entity and Personality. This may account for the more specific reference in Sufi writings to God as the Lover, Friend and some kind of Other, outside the Self, though one may reach Him/Her only through self, which must be transformed into selflessness. Yet here and there, even in Zen a less overt tenderness sometimes emerges in the nature poems and the rarer love poems of this tradition. Of course, an important distinction that should be noted between a significant philosophical premise of Buddhism and that of various Western monotheistic traditions is the belief in the immortal, imperishable soul or the Gnostic *pneuma*. This concept has its roots in the Hindu belief in *atman*, an independent, immortal essence in living beings. Buddhism, on the other hand, denies the existence of such an essence. Though I suppose most scholars consider Buddhist theology to be technically speaking agnostic, the actual history, practice and cosmology of Buddhism is a tangle of contradictions on the issue of Divine presence; for an agnostic or even atheistic theology, Buddhist mythology is virtually crowded with demons and spirits of all types, plus heaven and hell to boot.

This essay cannot attempt to do anything more than allude to the source of what this writer feels is the major distinctions between Sufi poets and Zen poets on the matter of their respective

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forms of gnosis, which I will now rephrase, however inadequately, as a perception of the world beyond ordinary consciousness. All the more deliciously contradictory and inconsistent is the poetry of Zen about "the Tao that cannot be spoken"! The volume of works from these great traditions is too vast to do anything but scratch its surface in a study of this length, but I hope some glimpse of my thesis can be seen here. In the next and final section I will explore the gnosis of contemporary Zen poet, Takahashi Shinkichi, among others, and their poems of an ecstatic realization of the Way.

References