

~~David Padwa~~
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WHAT'S THE SANSKRIT WORD FOR COYOTE?

Around Columbia University in the early 1950s I knew Carl Solomon, Gregory Corso, and Allen Ginsberg, and I had met Kerouac a few times. When the subsequent literary surge out of California began I paid attention as Gary's name and vigorous poems came floating East on numerous occasions. I had a vague impression of some hulking lumberjack who stirred coffee with his thumb. The notion of a "dharma bum" was particularly pleasing to me.

During the fifties I had begun to find my intellectual home in Buddhism. I didn't have a teacher but was not uncomfortable with the path of an autodidact. A vectoring of many forces led me on, which finally crystallized when I grasped that this was a "religion" based on a philosophy of emptiness, impermanence, and a quality called "suchness." I couldn't believe my luck. Around that time I had a large book of Buddhist sculptures. Most of the sublime faces showed a tantalizing hint of a smile. Why does the Buddha smile? I resolved to meditate on this and passed many hours with a photo of the Korean Miroku (Maitreya) now at Horyuji in Nara in Japan. Somehow, it all came together for me just about then. In the thirty-odd years that have since passed, any discoveries and insights revealed by my explorations into the nature of Buddhist dharma have inevitably seemed deeply familiar. "Of course," I say to myself, "of course."

In 1967, after a second passage through India, I planned to stay in Japan on my way back to the States. My friend, the inimitable, irreverent, and ever-joyful Alan Watts, whose free-wheeling words on Buddhism had served as useful handholds in earlier years, was also there that September. (Alan talks about Gary that autumn in his autobiography, *In My Own Way*. Talking with Alan over sake, I scribbled his words on a scrap of paper: "The basic questions: [thoughtful pause after each one] Where did it come from? Are we going to make it? Where are we going to put it? Who is going to clean up afterwards? Is it serious?").

Alan had sent a message to Kathmandu suggesting that I meet him in Kyoto. This worked out fine, and within a few days of my arrival

he had introduced me to Ogata Roshi's informal *sangharama* for transients at Chotoku-in (Shokoku-ji). I was given a six-mat tatami room in the same hall where Sesshu the painter had lived in the fifteenth century. Ogata spoke English and in the 1930s had been at the University of Chicago, my alma mater. We got along rather well. Nothing very deep or rigorous, but lots in the way of friendly talk over breakfast after morning zazen, and some pleasant experiences of Buddhist "kidding around" (the *Hahayana*). Sometimes we pay too little attention to the kind of good-natured teaching that precisely conveys "the unbearable lightness of being," and I have always been partial to this style. A week or so later Alan said, "You've got to meet Gary Snyder," and introduced us. He was two years older than I was. We quickly found commonalities: friends, places, books, shipping out to sea, worldviews. This was no unlettered lumberjack, but an intellectual. And unlike most intellectuals I have known, he wasn't stupid.

I think I recall the first time we talked, just the two of us. We strolled through a temple ground somewhere in the city. We were talking about the difference between the illusory and the imaginary. While I no longer remember who said what, or even very much about the details of our conversation, I retain to this moment an impression of the clarity of Gary's thought, the masculine confidence of his views, and the relatively egoless vigor with which he expressed himself. I had a strong sense of Chaucer's "gladly would he learn and gladly teach," no trace of a man trying to score points. Anyway, we got on.

He and Masa had recently married, and they lived in a small house rather near the edge of town. The early evolution of Gary's significant Buddhist library was clearly evident. The house was a friendly social point and on more than a few occasions I slept over on the tatamis rather than make the trip back to Chotoku-in. Through Gary I met Philip Whalen, Julie Wellings, the Benedictine Dom Aelred Graham (who also wrote about that autumn in *Zen Catholicism*), Irmgard Schloegel, Edouard Roditi, Cid Corman, Bob Strickland, the Chief Monk of Daitoku-ji, and various others. (In later years I met a variety of Buddhist scholars through Gary: Philip Yampolsky, Burton Watson, and Alex Wayman.) I remember Phil Whalen's birthday party at the Snyders'. Every Buddhist noisemaker a sentient being might want (wooden fishes, bells, gongs, clogs, drums, sha-

kuhachis, all in assorted sizes) was employed to make up a dharma percussion and conch band.

One day he said, "Let's go for a hike." At six in the morning he put on a badger-skin apron turned back-assward and we headed up into the hills, which began at the doorstep. That was the first time I followed his strong, rhythmic, sure-footed steps up some hill. I am taken with his love for strenuous physical values. We spent most of the day going up and up, with the briefest lunch break, on faint trails through magnificent forests of cryptomeria pine. The views were all from scroll paintings, in eighty shades of grey green. We topped out on the highest ridge. None of us was talkative. Time to go down. "Let's bushwhack," he said, and we were off cross-country down incredibly steep, rough, and complicated watercourses. This was the first time I heard about the Yamabushi sect, and Gary's informative lecture was given on the move as we struggled down the hillsides through a thick and blind undergrowth that went on forever. One couldn't see Gary, but we followed his thrashing and listened to him drone on about Buddhist forest cults. It was an amazing performance. Hours later we emerged at a tiny mountain village where the wife of the local Zen priest tagged Gary's Japanese language skills and invited us to meet her husband. He decided to give us tea. The rustic simplicity was a perfect setting. Napkins and bowls were laid out. Water boiled. He opened the tea caddy and, with amused surprise, saw that it was empty. Oh well. He poured from an old pot and used his tea whisk on what was only hot water. We all sipped appreciatively, pretending. The tea ceremony should lead the guests to reality. At dusk we took a bus back to Kyoto. In retrospect, it was the kind of day Gary has been giving me for years.

A week or so later, while Julie Wellings was sweeping acorns in the monastery's courtyard, Ruth Fuller Sasaki, abbess of Ryosen-an, Daitoku-ji, who was largely responsible for Gary's coming to Japan, died. I never knew her, but I went with Gary to a private memorial alongside her remains. We sat with her for a long time and Gary chanted the Hannya-Shingyo.

Eating at the Snyders' always involved cooking over a hanging firepot and reciting the English translation of a Buddhist grace over food. Gary's English renderings of Buddhist ritual texts (gathas, prayers, memorials, vows, blessings, and so on) have always seemed especially impressive. His small collection called *The Wooden Fish* is

a masterpiece that should be reprinted. His version of the Four Vows never reifies and stays fresh at each utterance.

After I had been a few months in Japan, the weather grew very cold. My room at Chotoku-in was unheated and this contributed to my feeling that it was time to move on. Gary's last words to me as I parted Kyoto stayed with me for a long time (still with me, actually): "Let's do something together," he said. The threshold year of 1968 culture lay ahead.

When the Snyders started their family and came back to California from Japan, they moved temporarily near Mill Valley, to Roger Sommers' collection of houses on top of the ridge overlooking the canyons where Green Gulch Farm and Muir Woods are located. (Alan Watts later died up there and Gary wrote a revealing poetic tribute to him.) The place was conveniently near San Francisco but beyond the earshot of urban noise. Margot St. James was up there; also Elsa Gidlow, and Alan and Jano Watts. I was an occasional visitor. I saw immediately that Gary wasn't affiliating with any of the various Buddhist *sanghas* in America, yet somehow was feeling friendly about all of them.

Gary and I briefly worked on an idea to do a film script based on the transmission from the first to the second patriarch, that is, from Bodhidharma to Hui-ko. The event was moved to the seventeenth century and the characters were to be American Indians. We decided to visit Anasazi sites in the Southwest to pick up vibrations from the landscape, and arranged to meet in Santa Fe (which was a fateful occurrence for me as it led to my moving there from New York and strongly shaped the rest of my life). We rented a car and headed up to the Four Corners area. Nanao Sakaki was with us, as were Simon Ortiz and one or two other friends. We saw Chaco Canyon, Shiprock, Monument Valley, and Canyon de Chelly. (I know of at least four poems that came out of that trip: about four-corner hopscotch, the redneck bar in Farmington, New Mexico, the Black Mesa strip mine, and the Anasazi.) We went down to see Antelope ruin in Canyon del Muerto. It was unbelievably quiet. In the afternoon we sat in some shade. Gary went off some few hundred yards, unrolled his portable altar, and sat in erect spine, motionless, for a long time. Later, still at the same spot, he opened a notebook and wrote for a while. (I saw him do the identical thing seventeen years later in the Brooks Range in Alaska.) Nanao's wonderful planet-loving hetero-

dox Buddhism was a formative source of strength and innovation for Gary. Simon, profoundly schooled at Acoma Pueblo, illustrated something extremely deep about ancient ways. I was responsible for the view from Manhattan. It was a marvelous trip. Nothing was left untouched.

At about this time Gary decided that “home” was going to be up in the Sierra foothills, where he owned a piece of land on San Juan Ridge, between the middle and south forks of the Yuba River, with Allen Ginsberg and Dick Baker. I remember going up there with him to fell and later to strip logs for the wonderful Japanese-style house that would be built. He called the place “Kitkitdizze” after the Maidu Indian word for the woody shrub that is the principal ground cover there. He was clearly in the process of reinventing Turtle Island.

More important, his great contribution to the evolution of an American Buddhist *sangha* was beginning. No priests were required. This was for householders, manual laborers, skeptical intellectuals, families with children, professionals, dropouts of every description, American Indians, scientists, scholars, bums, and lucky folks who had never heard the word. The practice was ecumenically traditional: sit, study, adapt, directly penetrate toward one’s true nature. The first zendo was the meadow, and the deer on the ridge became acquainted with Buddhists and came close. This was the early 1970s.

Gary persuaded me to share some undeveloped land next door, and it gave me chances to visit over the years. There was always work. Social capital was being created every day. I remember when the fruit trees were planted. I remember when their first fruits were eaten. I was there when the well was drilled and remember a Maidu-Buddhist ritual confection to mark that event. There were always maypoles to be set up, visitors to look after, wine to drink, motors to fix, children to cosset, boards to paint, baths to take, books to discuss, fences to repair, meditations to sit, chickens to feed, Buddhist philosophy to discuss, firebreaks to cut, tall tales to tell, underbrush to clear, and rituals to invent.

Gary contributed something large to the cultural forces that started to sweep through America from the time he returned in 1968. I believe that he was personally developed to the point where he himself was not greatly acted upon by what was happening at that time (I say this respectfully), but somehow he laid a wrap on events and

managed to torque them over a few degrees—and small angles project out to subtend vast arcs. His essay on Buddhism and “the coming revolution” illustrates what I mean. The revolution never came, but the dharma was being absorbed. “But permanent revolution is like permanent surgery,” I said to him. “Ouch,” he said. I asked him why Japan as a nation, the recipient of Zen teaching, was such a sad industrial sleepwalker. “They got the message,” he said, “but they never opened the envelope.” American Buddhists seemed to be interested in opening the envelope, in Gary’s view. Notwithstanding the poignant knowledge that we were living in “a dharma-ending age,” there was something young and fresh about being born as an American *sangha*.

We discussed whether a Western *sangha* needed an updated *vinaya*. He wrote me the following:

Seems to me it poses yet-unresolved problems (sectarian & other)—(egos)—high-visibility—self-consciousness—and yet may be necessary. I’ve been reading *Vinaya Texts* translations (5 vols!) and much is tedious and legalistic. Mustn’t lose sight of “All Beings” sense of *sangha*—“the inner laws of things,” the *vinaya*. We have to make/be a people (diné, natives, in touch, in place) before we can begin to be a spiritual *sangha* (the historical *sangha* can exist by virtue of its closeness, trust, support by, peasantries and peoples—(like guerrillas —“fish in water”)—*one* level is to build that, people to “support” the *sangha* (—new religions can always draw support from disoriented urban classes—but then they are saprophytes and have little long range strength (like Mithra-ism)—Am not really making objection but sharing thoughts. Like, I am concerned that the Buddhist groups in US have “right occupation” behind them—Could one crossbreed *Vinaya* Council with medicine/pow-wow circle idea and focus on *gharba-dhatu* “how to live in our place” as well as *vajra-dhatu*—“how to realize mind” perspectives?

That was toward the end of 1972, and it shows the consistent link between places and mind, between locus and logos, that is so prominent in Gary’s writing. The little place of San Juan Ridge. The middle place of Planet Earth. The big place of this Universe.

Gary is a prodigious correspondent. In an age when epistolary skills are dead it is always a special pleasure to open the mailbox and find an envelope bearing his unmistakable italic. My own letters were

fewer, but I would frequently send him clippings that I thought he ought to see and, years later, when he broke down and had a phone put in, I would call from time to time. Over these years I'd guess that I've had more than a hundred letters from him. Some were five-line notes, others went on for pages; about a third were typed and the rest were by hand. Frequently there was a poem or a small enclosure. I'm not a collector and feel like a vandal confessing to the fact that I don't have more than a few (which seem to have survived by accident). There's one provenanced "on the Okhotsk Sea, Hokkaido" when he made a trip to that northern island, dated July 17, 40072. It includes this three-liner:

Riding the
slender boat of *Mu*
knifing through.

That says it, doesn't it?

In 1972 the United Nations convened an international conference on the environment in Stockholm, Sweden. A number of us thought it might be useful (or fun) to produce an "alternative" conference at the same place and time. It produced only a depressing mixture of Swedish self-righteousness, Third-World industrial lust, hippie idiocy, mindless leftism, and shameless egotism. Many peaceniks and incipient "Greens" were present, as were Melissa Savage, Jack Loeffler, David Brower, Stewart Brand, Wavy Gravy, Paul Ehrlich, Margaret Mead, Barry Commoner, and twenty-odd Indians from various parts of the Americas (the Hopis had deer-skin IDs as their *only* travel documents, no problems). Also Gary, reading poems and wondering where the Buddhist dharma of right action and right views was going to fit into all of this emerging eco-politics. I think it was around then that Gary convinced himself that it would have to start and finish with right meditation.

Back at Kitkitdizze the zendo moved from the meadow to an awning, passed through the Snyders' living room, and went upscale when it located in the barn. No place for silk brocades; this was a rough, backcountry circle of friends. Ring of Bone Zendo it was called (after the marvelous poem by Lew Welch). Bob Greensfelder, Will Staple, Chuck Dockham, and Masa (especially) provided granite support for the *sangha* of San Juan Ridge. Calendars and notes were sent regularly to active and associate members. The *sesshins*

took on evocative names ("Seeds-to-Snow," "Great Cold," "Snow-to-Flowers"). A connection to the Hawaiian Diamond Sangha was stitched together. Aitken Roshi and others came to visit or teach.

Although the particular circumstances of its origins gave it a Zen lineage, that particular connection linking back to the historical Buddha was almost incidental. The Ring of Bone community never developed the stink of sectarianism, and the study and practice of dharma was genuinely ecumenical. There was room enough in the big garage for all the vehicles. In time, a handsome dedicated year-round zendo and community hall was built (entirely by the volunteer efforts of hundreds), with a connecting kitchen and teachers' residence. It is impossible to say whether or not this place will survive just a few years or last for many centuries.

I never knew anyone who could live as richly, as elegantly, on so little money. To visit Kitkitdizze was to attend the home palace of a forest king. Nothing of real worth was lacking; there was a bottomless inventory of high-level objects and activities that most of us could not imagine. (My boys will never forget the recurve bow and quiver of arrows with sponge rubber tips that let them mock-hunt the deer browsing about in the cooler seasons—the arrows thumped them on the side, and they looked up without bolting, with their patient soft eyes saying, "Haven't you outgrown this dumb game yet?") This oxymoronic picture of spartan luxury has a simple explanation. We sat on the ground watching the moon. "The fact is, Gary," I said, "this is really an extreme form of elitism." He replied with a thin smile: "Shhh!"

Over the years Gary's livelihood was achieved from his writings, and not less through his readings. On hundreds of platforms he blended the familiar themes of dharma, ecology, and poetics in an artful mix of reciting poems, talking essays, trying out ideas, answering questions, and sharing thoughts. Gary has been to more college campuses than any secretary of education could contemplate. He's probably introduced the small seeds of Buddhist thought to more places than anyone else in America. Although he was no stranger to the prominent gilt-edged powerhouses of the university world, he was never particularly taken with the precious, self-absorbed, and received pretensions commonly found there. Instead, he seemed studiously to prefer smaller, more innocent, "backcountry" institutions, which could remind him of the braver intellectual openness of un-

dergraduate days at Reed College. Finally, almost inevitably, he became a professor at the University of California at Davis.

One of these days mainstream Western academic philosophy is going to discover the Buddhist void, *sunyata*. In the last forty years, linguistic philosophers, existentialists, semioticians, the new anthropologists, and all the deconstructionists have gotten very close. But still no cigar. The dread engendered in the European mind by the concept of emptiness as a manifestation of despair, of satanic nihilism, a *black* vortex where "everything is permitted," spinning out personae like Aleister Crowley, Charles Manson, and Adolph Hitler, is very strong in our society. But one day, when they run out of the recourse of every conceivable evasion, our philosophers will have to sit down in a quiet place and observe mind directly.

The understanding and experience of voidness as bright transparency, as pure openness, as suchness, as "amazing grace," whose essential and ineluctable countersign is compassion, still remains ahead for most of our intellectuals. But it is inevitable. And when it happens, as it may soon, there will be an overcompensated and exaggerated rush to restudy Nietzsche, *abhidharma*, Stcherbatsky's "Logic," Sanskrit terminology, koans, and so on. "The full catastrophe," as the classics say. Later, when the dust settles, people will want some clues to using dharma in contemporary daily Western life. To whom or what will they turn? Where will they find earthen clues grounded in the humane secular skepticisms of scientific linguistics, ecology, storytelling, paleo-history at the dawn of human sapience and sentience, "wilderness," the relations between women and bears, mind self-observed, physical labor, and endless mountains and rivers? Where else but in the compressions of Buddhist poetry! These are, in fact, the new *vinaya* texts.

Most religions are beds of superstition aspiring to ethics and spirituality, and many Buddhists follow a superstitious practice. Yet Buddhism, as taught by its founder, is unique in its reliance on direct observation and examination, rather than magical faith, in striving for high goals. Gary strikes me as an exemplar of the possibility of determined religious practice stripped of mumbo-jumbo. There's nothing grim about it, either. This is the kind of *dharma* we need in our time.

Well, old-fart age is approaching, though the Sage of the Sakyas stayed young into his eighties. To sum up: Gary's no-nonsense Bud-

dhist style is the important contribution: free of superstition, and playing the mindful heuristics of poetic ritual. He is my slightly older brother. I don't mean to make him more than he is. He isn't. And after all, there's a lot of Coyote in him and it's not a good idea to speak too well of Coyote.