

An Overview of American Buddhist Poetry: Its Genesis and Typical Features and Differences from Asian Buddhist Poetry

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Abstract

American Buddhist poetry is an interesting genre which has enjoyed its increased readership since the early nineties. However, it is more perplexing than clarifying, especially when read in juxtaposition with Asian Buddhist poetry. One might experience difficulties in the interpretation of underlying spiritual message which is to a large degree *americanised*, the unconventional poetic form that even complicates its meaning, and its remarkable divergence from the Asian counterpart. This paper then aims to discuss three main issues, namely the development of Buddhism in America together with typical, complicated features of American Buddhism, the salient characteristics of Asian Buddhist poetry, and the comparison between the two cultures of Buddhist poetry, in the hope of shedding brighter light on this special genre.

บทคัดย่อ

บทกลอนคำสอนทางศาสนาพุทธที่แต่งโดยกวีชาวอเมริกันมีความน่าสนใจเป็นพิเศษและได้รับความสนใจอย่างต่อเนื่องตั้งแต่ต้นยุคคริสต์ศตวรรษ 1900 ทว่าการทำความเข้าใจบทกลอนประเภทนี้ดูจะไม่ง่ายนักและยังอาจสร้างความสงสัยให้กับผู้อ่านอีกด้วย โดยเฉพาะถ้านำไปเปรียบเทียบกับบทกลอนประเภทเดียวกันที่เขียนโดยกวีชาวเอเชีย ความสลับซับซ้อนของบทกลอนโดยกวีชาวอเมริกันสามารถสรุปออกมาเป็นสามประการหลัก ดังนี้ ประการแรก เนื้อหา คติ คำสอนทางศาสนาพุทธได้ถูกปรับเปลี่ยนให้สอดคล้องกับรูปแบบความคิดของคนอเมริกัน ประการที่สอง ฉันทลักษณ์ของบทกลอนมีความหลากหลายมาก อีกทั้งกวีไม่ได้แต่งตามรูปแบบดั้งเดิม และประการที่สามคือวิธีการและเนื้อหาที่น่าสนใจซึ่งต่างกับกวีชาวเอเชียอย่างเห็นได้ชัด เพื่อเป็นแนวทางในการอ่านบทกลอนคำสอนทางศาสนาพุทธที่แต่งโดยกวีชาวอเมริกันให้มีความเข้าใจลึกซึ้งยิ่งขึ้น ผู้เขียนจึงขอแนะนำและอภิปรายข้อมูลที่สำคัญได้แก่ พัฒนาการศาสนาพุทธในอเมริกาพร้อมด้วยลักษณะเฉพาะของบทกลอนประเภทนี้ที่เขียนโดยกวีชาวอเมริกันและชาวเอเชีย และการเปรียบเทียบความเหมือนความต่างที่ปรากฏในบทกลอนของกวีจากสองวัฒนธรรม

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An Overview of American Buddhist Poetry

Generally speaking, Buddhist poetry is a complex and varied genre of poets. There are several reasons for this. For instance, first, this kind of verse is not to be fully understood by intellectual, but spiritual endeavor as if practitioners, a reader of this special genre is, indeed, required to practise and realise by himself in order to discover the true meaning of these poems. Yet, committed Buddhist practice is perhaps not the best solution, since it is too demanding for most readers, let alone a non-Buddhist readership. Second, the fact that there are no distinct forms for Buddhist verse, together with a wide range of the abstract teachings that constitute different poetic themes, makes it more challenging. As Gary Gach puts it most precisely, ‘there is no one model for a “Buddhist poem” (1998).’ Indeed, Buddhist poems are not necessarily composed by monks, nor do they contain religious terminology to be so. Thus, the works of the different poets are very various, and at times, seem at odds due to such broad affinities of matter and style. Last, the portrayal of transcendental experience is by nature subjective and ineffable, perhaps making it harder for the readership to relate with imaginative sympathy.

As far as American Buddhist poetry is concerned, the challenge is even greater. In addition to the inherent complicated qualities of Buddhist poetry of any cultures, the American kind has its own reformed character. Some of its characteristics include various techniques, ranging from the use of autobiography, projective verse, and non-literary elements, such as diagrams and doodles, to the fundamentally different writing principles that inevitably inform the poem. For the latter case in particular, the most obvious example would be Allen Ginsberg’s slogan ‘first thought best thought’ which is contrary to Andrew Schelling’s ‘continual refinement’ (cited in Johnson & Paulenich, 1991).¹ In fact, not only do the different poets employ highly personalised techniques, their poems are so secularised that uninitiated non-Buddhist and Buddhist readers alike could be perplexed or misled.

When investigated more closely, American Buddhist poetry is a synthesis of two different cultures, i.e. Eastern and Western, both in terms of philosophy and art. The philosophy includes the knowledge of culture, worldview and religion, and the art mainly implies the use of language and literature. Once these elements are blended by the American poets and then translated for American audience, the process of Americanisation by way of the mode of expression inevitably gets underway. This process is beneficial and risky at the same time. Its apparent advantages lie in uniting the two worlds, usually known as *East Meets West*, which, in effect, increases mutual understanding of the two peoples. On the contrary, if sound knowledge of these two cultures is inadequate, corresponding difficulties in interpreting these poems will arise, probably resulting in cultural and religious misunderstandings. For example, while American readers may not be aware of the deep meaning of Buddhist messages that lie beneath the poem since they are transformed to an American ear to a certain extent, Asian readers may find it peculiar and even unacceptable when certain offensive ideas such as sex and violence are incorporated, which is thought to be inconsistent with the

Buddhist moral conduct. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (2011) urge caution to this literary clash, or in their own words, 'Poetry War', where they specifically point out that whereas 'Asian traditions [stress] asceticism, collectivism, and respect for teachers, an American emphasis [is placed on] sexual expression, democracy, and egalitarianism.'

As a consequence, when approaching American Buddhist poetry, more care is needed in order to minimise misinterpretation and maximise the benefits of this special genre which is, primarily, intended to assist the readers of the two cultures to become amicable and, most importantly, wiser. The operative word 'wiser' is significant, for it denotes spiritual, rather than intellectual, development. In my opinion, in order to understand American Buddhist poems, some salient and common characteristics will prove more helpful than any kind of explanation. Like a travel guide, they can at least place the reader in the frame; that is, what they are most expected to see and think and they prevent them from losing track.

Yet, the task of figuring out such characteristics is not immediately at hand. It is naturally complicated as concluded by Kent Johnson and Craig Paulenich (1991) that 'the different poets revealed a diversity that, at least at first glance, seemed more paradoxical than clarifying'. From my own perspective, there are, however, two important attributes which pervade in American, and perhaps any cultural, Buddhist verse. First, it is with a consequence of the overall peaceful ambience that leads the reader to become calm and introspective, despite its secular tones which may seemingly produce a sensuous feel. Generally speaking, whatever the tone of the poem, the mood of the reader has to be peaceful at last. At any point, the reader is encouraged to abandon the outer world, and then return to his inner realm. The other inherent attribute lies in its express purpose. As Helen Gardner (1971) maintains, a religious poetry is the poetry 'that treats of revelation and of man's response to revelation'. I totally agree with her conviction, and as for American Buddhist poetry in particular, which is also a kind of religious verse, such an important task is performed well and emphatically. It works as a vehicle to assist the reader to attain epiphany, or at least acquire a better understanding of life and nature which the Buddha discovered and expounded to humankind.

To summarise the above discussion, I borrow Andrew Schelling (2005)'s words as they serve as the most precise and arresting encapsulation:

There are indeed ways in which American poetry, doing new things in new languages, achieves the old effect of provoking spiritual insight through the art of poetry.

The Development of Buddhism in America and the Genesis of American Buddhist Poetry

Prior to a detailed discussion of Buddhism in American literature, it is worth mentioning the two most important figures whose efforts to introduce Orientalism, including this Eastern religion in particular, to the Western world, are tremendous and laudable. Their biographies and contributions are synopsised here. The first person is Sir William Jones (1736-1794). Jones was an English philologist and translator of Asian literature. While studying at Oxford, he discovered an interest in Oriental literature, beginning with the Arabic language, then Persian, Turkish and Chinese. In 1783 Jones and his bride Anna Maria decided to go to India. There he was attracted to the study of Indian spirituality, Hinduism, Sanskrit, the language used to record Hindu religious philosophy and rituals, and at last, Buddhism, in which the last case, he was not very successful because Buddhism had become less prominent by the time of his arrival in India.

With an enthusiasm to assemble like-minded people in order to make a valuable contribution to the topic, he founded the 'Asiatick Society', whose one important mission was that the members contributed to its journal '*Asiatick Researches*' (Rick Fields, 1992). A number of its articles increased the understanding of Asian cultures among Westerners, and for a better knowledge of Buddhism in particular, the Society made an attempt to study it through Tibet. Through these efforts, as Rick Fields reveals in his important book *How the Swan Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, 'Jones's fame spread as seven hundred copies were sent to England while still others made their way to America'. Specifically, Fields indicates that one piece of writing from this journal entitled "Hymns to Narayana" 'made a deep impression on the young Ralph Waldo Emerson when he read it in 1820' (Rick Fields, 1992). This is perhaps the first warm reception of Eastern spirituality in this new country which has had enduring effects on its writers up to the present day. To underscore the importance of this English pioneering Orientalist, I find, again, Field's metaphor very precise and arresting:

He [Jones] had only been in India twelve years, but the mine of Sanskrit had been opened, and its riches made visible to the world. The voyage to America, which Jones never made, would be taken instead by his work.

The other person of importance in this area is Sir Edwin Arnold (1832-1904). Like Jones, Arnold was an English journalist, author and translator of Asian literature. He finished his studies at Oxford, and had a great gift for languages and poetry. At the age of twenty-four, he went to India and served as School Principal at Deccan College, Poona for seven years. During his stay in India, his interest in the ancient Indian culture and languages gradually developed. Arnold eventually immersed himself in Indian spiritualism and 'from there, it is just a matter of course to the discovery of the Greatest Ascetic and the Renunciate *par-excellence* of India—Gotama the Buddha' (2014).

Realising its spiritual benefits, Arnold wished that ‘the core and substance of Indian Philosophic Tradition [the Buddha’s teachings] should be communicated to his own people in their languages.’ In 1879 he composed *The Light of Asia*, and he explicitly stated that this narrative poem was to ‘depict the life and character and indicate the philosophy of that noble hero and reformer, Prince Gautama of India, the founder of Buddhism.’ After great success, this book becomes a Buddhist scripture for Western readership which has had considerable influence until the present day. Edwin Ariyadasa supports that this work ‘aid[s] in the better and more wholesome mutual understanding between East and West.’ From the literary perspective, *The Light of Asia*, in Lawrence Normand (2013)’s words, ‘not only served as a source for the Buddha and his teaching, but also demonstrated how the resources of literature could transform ideas and doctrines into the emotionally charged dimensions of narrative, atmosphere and form.’

In my opinion, Arnold’s profession of, if not conversion to, Buddhist faith is much more revealing than his dedicated investigation of this religion, as well as his talent to compose the book in poetic form. In the final concluding stanza of this book lies and reads his significantly memorable Buddhist pledge. For Buddhist practitioners, this pledge is more likely to be ascribed to his practical, rather than intellectual, understanding. Arnold professes with strong faith and hope:

I Take My Refuge In Thy Name And Thee!
I Take My Refuge In Thy Law Of Good!
I Take My Refuge In Thy Order! OM!
The Dew Is On the Lotus!—Rise, Great Sun!
AND LIFT MY LEAF AND MIX ME WITH THE WAVE.
OM MANI PADME HUM, THE SUNRISE COMES!
THE DEWDROP SLIPS INTO THE SHINING SEA!

America

In America, as early as 1820, there were already different traditions of Buddhism brought by Asian immigrants, but it was not until 1893 that Buddhism gained a genuine popularity among American intellectuals, when this religion was formally introduced in the World Congress of Religion in Chicago (James Coleman, 2001). The important changes and the important figures who introduced Buddhism to America are best summarised by Lawrence Normand that ‘Sōen Shaku [leader of the Japanese delegation] set out to present Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism as being compatible with ‘the latest developments in Western philosophy and science’, and then ‘D.T. Suzuki later built on the Japanese delegation’s success when he fashioned a version of Zen Buddhism.’ Unfortunately, the early interest in Buddhism in North America was an academic fashion. Buddhism was studied through textbooks in order to satisfy curiosity of interested academia and writers. Indeed, a number of intrinsic attributes of this Eastern religion appealed to them. One of the very basic, yet startling, truth is that Buddhism is not an ordinary religion. Nārada Mahā Thera (1973) explains that

‘Buddhism is not strictly a religion in the sense in which that word is commonly understood, for it is not “a system of faith and worship,” owing any allegiance to a supernatural God.’

To explain this point further, the Buddha’s teachings, known as dharma, ‘[are] not a body of immutable dogma or a system of speculative thought, [but they are] essentially a means, a raft for crossing over from the “near shore” of ignorance, craving, and suffering to the “far shore” of transcendental peace and freedom’ (Bhikkhu Ñānamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995). Buddhism is, therefore, considered as practical and not as philosophical, since experience, self-realisation and actual practice are all indispensable. Importantly, the distinction between these two modes of learning needs to be made. As Nārada Mahā Thera points out clearly, ‘Philosophy deals mainly with knowledge and is not concerned with practice; whereas Buddhism lays special emphasis on practice and realization’. However, this does not mean that reasoning or intellectual study is of no importance in this religion. As the Buddhist scholar Rupert Gethin (1998) precisely concludes, the knowledge of dharma derives from the interplay between three kinds of understanding: that from listening (*suta*), that from reflection (*cintā*), and that from spiritual practice (*bhāvanā*). In other words, both attentive study and, most importantly, strenuous practice are required to understand the teachings of this religion, and they must be done in the right way.

In addition, the Buddhist belief that an individual has his own potential to achieve enlightenment without God’s power accelerates wider interests in Buddhism in America. This notion for Americans is, in Snodgrass’ words, ‘positive, self-reliant, and life affirming’ (Normand & Winch, 2013). In this regard, the Buddha’s own words to his disciples are worth repeating. He instructed that ‘You yourselves should make the exertion./The Tathāgatas are mere teachers’ (Nārada Mahā Thera, 1973). Some American thinkers paid particular attention to this aspect, and partly as a result, began to investigate this religion further until the present day.

Given the history of the varied infusions of Buddhism in American literature, one should probably not dismiss three important periods, namely 19th-century Transcendentalism when Buddhist concepts are incorporated for the first time; early Modernism in which some scholars and writers take a more critical view of its philosophy; and the Beat Generation in the mid 50’s and 60’s, when some of its members are dedicated practitioners of Buddhist teaching and write from their experience. My following discussion aims specifically to indicate the development of Buddhism, especially concerning its role, an approach to studying it, and the poets’ selection of Buddhist teachings, by way of providing some historical background and, primarily, illustrating the major writers’ works of the three eras.

Transcendentalism

As Richard Seager (1999) maintains, the Transcendentalists and the early romantics in America ‘were among the first generation of western writers and intellectuals to have

at their disposal the Hindu and Buddhist texts that scholars had been at work translating for several generations.’ Indeed, there is a significant reason for such a phenomenon. The American Transcendentalists during the 1840’s were those thinkers whose principal aim was to battle ‘against the “coldness” of 18th-century empiricism and its reliance on sense experience, [and so] the transcendentalists [assert] the supremacy of mind over matter and [defend] intuition as a guide to truth’ (Herzberg, 1963). Seeing the weakness of the existing practice and belief, they wished there was a spiritual change to their people. As W. Clark Gilpin (2012) puts it, they encouraged American citizens to ‘renounce subservience to “the mind of the past” and then to “invent” their own distinctive stance toward the world’.

Accordingly, they sought other philosophies and practices to support their conviction to effect the change. Buddhism, by nature, was among those found to be relevant and useful, and they immediately adopted it. For Transcendentalists, this Oriental religion was, however, a branch of knowledge among other many different philosophies and teachings, both Western and Eastern, which they blended together to form the basis of their eclectic belief. Other important concepts or theories to which the Transcendentalists paid special attention included the philosophy by Plato, Plotinus, English neo-Platonists, Cudworth and More, as well as the teachings of Confucius, the Mohammedan Sufis, the writers of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad-Gita, and the Hebrew and Greek authors (Hart, 1983).

In this way, it can then be said that the Transcendentalists’ appropriation of Buddhist philosophy was not treated purely as a religion or exclusively for spiritual purposes, mainly because, apart from the way they approached it intellectually or at most philosophically, Buddhism was combined with other schools of thought, which, inevitably, perhaps prevented them from immersing in the most essential practice of this religion. In the famous magazine of this movement *The Dial*, Ralph Waldo Emerson, an active member of the movement, states clearly that it aims ‘to bring together the grand expressions of the moral sentiment in different ages and races, the rules for the guidance of life, the bursts of piety and of abandonment to the Invisible and Eternal’ (Emerson, Fuller & Ripley, 1843).

Now, in order to trace early Buddhist philosophy in American literature of the nineteenth century, three prominent Transcendentalists together with their representative works are illustrated in more detail.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

Most critics agree that Oriental conceptions have considerable influence on Emerson’s writing, as reflected in many of his poems such as ‘Brahma’, ‘Saadi’ and ‘Hamatreya.’ With specific regard to Buddhism, a number of his works also bear witness to the varied influence of its teachings and elements, and indeed, his works influence the writers of the next generations to explore this religion further. Peter Jones (1980), for example, notes that ‘[his] eloquent fusion of oriental mysticism and individual

detachment has contributed to recent trends in ‘spontaneous art and extempore performance.’

However, I also find that Richard Seager’s caution that ‘it is easy to overestimate the importance of Asian religion to Emerson’ should be more or less at work when we interpret his writing from a Buddhist perspective. The widely-held notion that Emerson is ‘a poet of both the soul and Nature’ may suggest his application of the Buddhist approach, by which an understanding of life and nature is required of a person to become enlightened (Woodberry, 1907). However, this notion could be partly true or even misleading, since an interest in nature is universal and not limited to Buddhist thought.

Emerson’s famous works, such as “Self-Reliance” and “The Over-Soul”, stress the importance of human consciousness, intuition and then self-trust over rigid rationalism (Abrahms, 1985). A memorable line from “Self-Reliance” reads with the complete authority of the poet, when the speaker announces ‘I am the owner of the sphere’ (Emerson, 2010). As for the role of nature, “Each and All,” for instance, describes the speaker’s calm contemplation in which he is gradually tuned into the reality of nature:

Over me soared the eternal sky,
Full of light and of deity;
Again I saw, again I heard,
The rolling river, the morning bird; –
I yielded myself to the perfect whole.

Even more arrestingly, ‘The Waterfall’ reveals the relationship between the inherent power of nature and self-knowledge. The poem begins:

A patch of meadow upland
Reached by a mile of road,
Soothed by the voice of water,
With birds and flowers bestowed.

Hither I come for strength
Which well it can supply
For Love draws might from terrene force
And potencies of skies.

According to the above extract, natural elements, for example, meadow, water, animals, skies, are the centre of awareness, all of which contribute to gaining an understanding of the self and nature. The speaker pays solitary attention to natural environments and shows his fervent belief in the power of nature, and then his strength is gained through such an experience. When considering the tone of the poem, Emerson’s descriptions of surrounding environments are peaceful, relaxing and

encouraging, and as such, the reader is drawn into an introspective mood necessary for the attainment of insight.

The poem finally reveals spiritual zest, suggesting that the speaker eventually achieves power of his soul within himself, which derives from the realisation of natural power and that of his self:

When Ali prayed and loved
Where Syrian water rolls,
Upward the ninth heaven thrilled and moved;
At the tread of the jubilant soul.

However, despite the fact that Emerson's poetry bears marked affinities with the Buddhist principles of self-realisation and harmony with nature, this does not mean that his poems can be assumed to be 'Buddhist poetry'. In fact, central focuses and ways of treating the soul or mind within the two types of poetry are quite different. By comparison, whereas the soul for Emerson needs to be completely realised by an individual who may not become truly free, the Buddhist mind is to be completely free from suffering. That is, Emerson's poetry remains of a philosophical kind. It deals extensively with experientialism, individualism and subjectivity, but, I would suggest, fails to portray the genuine freedom derived from the pure and wise mind, which is the ultimate goal of Buddhism. Strictly speaking, his poetry lacks a clear demonstration of a purified mind with which a person can transcend the material realm.

Other poems such as "The Garden," "Transition," "Bird," and "Water" exhibit his philosophy of nature and the mind, but they do not indicate a direct relation to the Buddhist central ideas of eradicating suffering and attaining absolute freedom within the mind. In addition, Emerson's involvement with Hinduism and Buddhism can be seen in the way that he attempts to apply the concepts of these two religions in his own manner, rather than investigating them according to their original purposes. In fact, Hinduism is, one would argue, more influential on his writings than Buddhism, as shown by the many references to Hindu gods and traditions in his poetry. Still, such incorporation does not necessarily indicate a profound belief. In "Brahma," for instance, Emerson's allusion to the Indian priest does not suggest any reference to Hindu teachings, but it is instead employed to reveal the speaker's self-reliance, which is Emerson's own interest: 'But thou, meek lover of the good!/ Find me and turn thy back on heaven.'

To conclude this discussion of the inspiration of reference to Eastern religion in the works of Emerson, I agree with Robert Gordon (2010), who claims that 'Given his eclectic method, Emerson felt free to borrow what he wished, and simply to pass over those aspects of Indian metaphysics inconsonant with his own philosophy'. Arthur Christy's argument is, too, helpfully clarifying when he maintains that 'Emerson's intertextual method of "borrowing" and "blending" is part of his active intellectual process, a process that seeks to extend the quoted material.' These two critics seem to

support, to a certain extent, my hypothesis that Emerson's Buddhist approach in his poetry was employed as a means for him to work with ideas that expressed his philosophical as well as spiritual concerns. To put it more simply, even though Emerson's poetry does reveal some engagement with Buddhism, that engagement is made in a collaborative fashion in order to support and give substance to his own philosophy. I then suggest that his poetry is not Buddhist in its essential religious understandings.

Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)

The second Transcendentalist to be discussed is Henry David Thoreau, another leading member of the movement. As Malcolm Young narrates his life and attitudes, Thoreau 'seemed to regard materialists, evangelists, and even certain types of scientists with varying levels of distrust' (see Young, 2009). He 'renounced his church membership at a young age.' One of his strongest opinions against Christianity is stated in his *Journal*:

[T]h sectarian and formalists are left floating on chips and slivers of doctrine... they make the mistake of preaching or insisting on the letter & not the meaning of the letter—the creed & not the life.

Thoreau then turned to another mode of living which could, he hoped, give him true insight as well as true freedom. He based, in the opinion of Young, 'almost his faith on his experience of nature.' His natural life was continued during the early 1850s with primary involvements in saunters in the countryside. Based on his *Journal*, David Robinson (2004) observes that 'he meditated on these excursions and recorded the growing mass of natural history of observations and data that they generated.'

Then his objection to credulous belief in God and passionate interest in nature encouraged him to approach the foreign 'sacred scriptures', which included the writings by 'the poets and philosophers of Persia and India—the Bhagvat Geeta, Vishnu Sarma, Laws of Menu, Saadi, and other "bibles" of the old Oriental religions'(Salt, 2005). Arrestingly, his translation of one chapter of the *Lotus Sutra (Saddharmapundarika-sutra)*, a key text in Buddhism, in *The Dial* in 1854 is more or less reflective of an interest in and knowledge of this religion (Bhushan, Garfield & Zablocki, 2009). Once Thoreau became more immersed in Buddhist philosophy through his reading, his urge to partake the Buddha state in which contemplation and practice are indispensable became stronger. He decided to lead an experimental life in his own natural abode called *Walden* (1882), also the name of another of his famous work. Thoreau described his purpose clearly:

I went to the woods because I wished to live desperately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear, nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary.

It is, however, not fair to call Thoreau a ‘Buddhist practitioner’, merely because of such knowledge and way of life. Even though his life may be in part influenced by the Buddhist concept of renunciation, it is impossible to tell whether he has acquired a truly free mind. Based on his numerous works, like Emerson, Thoreau displays his fascination with natural surroundings, their inherent power, and self-understanding, rather than a focus on the purified mind. Hence, Thoreau cannot be regarded as a ‘Buddhist poet,’ but as a writer for whom Versluis’ definition ‘self-transcendence in nature’ is more appropriate (Bhushan, Garfield & Zablocki, 2009).

In order to illustrate such a distinction, I take two poems by Thoreau which display his abiding ideas of power of nature and self-knowledge. The first poem is “Stanza”, which he contributed to *The Dial*. The beginning of the first stanza tells of the speaker’s realisation of nature and the emotion he experiences in response to it. The most beautiful time of the day is depicted and the speaker’s intention is expressed:

Nature doth have her dawn each day,
But mine are far between;
Content, I cry, for sooth to say,
Mine brightest are, I ween.

The poem then continues to reveal an intimate relationship between the speaker and nature, in which he desires to stay in harmony with nature. The last stanza eventually suggests his fulfilled wish:

As ’t were two summer days in one.
Two Sundays come together,
Our rays united make one Sun,
With fairest summer weather.

To a large extent, the poem indicates the influence of nature on Thoreau, who is successful and remembered as a poet of Nature and Life, and perhaps transcends himself by means of becoming harmonious with nature. As a Transcendentalist, Thoreau rejects materialism and seeks the world beyond in which the self may be fulfilled. His poetry shows that Thoreau exerts the power of nature, like Emerson, to reach life fulfillment.

The poem “Return of Spring” of Thoreau is another memorable poem in which the philosophy between his love for nature and his love for life is intertwined:

Behold, how spring appearing,
The Graces send forth roses;
Behold, how the wave of the sea
Is made smooth by the calm;
Behold, how the duck dives;
Behold, how the crane travels;

And Titan shines constantly bright.

At the very beginning, the poem asks the reader to “behold” the aesthetics of nature around him, from the earth to the sea and the skies. The vivid descriptions of beauty are made to refer to the lives of both animates and inanimates. The allusion to the Greek gods is obviously shown to intensify the poem’s amiable mood. This suggests not only the writer’s high state of happiness and fondness with nature, but also optimism, both of which can best display the poet’s ideas and emotions. Moreover, this poem elaborates the force of nature which puts the world in order, and pushes the beholder to think along with the speaker’s idea of sufficiency and dependency of nature:

The shadows of the clouds are moving;
The works of man shine;
The earth puts forth fruits;
The fruit of the olive puts forth.
The cup of Bacchus is crowned,
Along the leaves, along the branches,
The fruit, bending them down, flourishes.

In addition to his invitation to behold the aesthetics of nature, individualism is Thoreau’s prime concern. The above poem suggests that personal achievement can be accomplished when one is able to experience the power of nature and becomes a part of it.

As far as I can see, a number of Thoreau’s poems stress subjectivism and significance of nature. Therefore, it could be said that Thoreau’s idea of individualism and harmony with nature and Buddhist principles of natural self and mind are alike. However, this perhaps overlooks the fact that nature is universal and is not confined to any kind of poetry. That Thoreau’s writing deals mainly with nature and human closeness to it should perhaps be considered as not primarily religious in its focus. Thoreau seems to enjoy his personal bliss gained from nature and expresses such experience in his verse, but an expression of an enlightened mind is hard to pinpoint. By comparison, whereas Thoreau’s verse is nature-based, emotional and expressive, the Buddhist counterpart is realising and truthful with or without using nature as an integral poetic element.

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

Walt Whitman is another American poet whose influence on American literature in his time and also at the present time is enormous. Whitman is known as ‘the Poet of Democracy’ and is probably considered as ‘the inventor of American poetry’ (Loving, 2000). Unlike Emerson’s and Thoreau’s poetry, Whitman’s poetry is filled with social affairs and sexual expression, and often written in free verse. Whitman was also actively involved in politics, especially during the American Civil War. As far as religion is concerned, Whitman embraced all kinds, and his numerous writings are didactic and morally based. As William Guthrie (2005) asserts, ‘it is by consideration

of him as a religious teacher that we shall do to approach his work.’ In his *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman reveals his strong faith and also his concern:

Each is not for its own sake.
I say the whole earth and all the stars in the sky are for religions’ sake
I say no man has ever yet been half devout enough,
None has ever yet adored or worship’d half enough,
None has begun to think how divine he himself is, and how certain the future is
Know you, solely to drop in the earth the germs of a greater religion,
The following chants, each for its kind, I sing.

Spiritually, Whitman expressed an eager curiosity about the outer world and the metaphysics of self. As regard to the world, he often had doubts: ‘How curious! how real!/Underfoot the divine soil, overhead the sun’. But, he also returned to investigate the soul and at last discovered that ‘Regarding it all intently a long while, then dismissing it,/I stand in my place with my own day here.’

Jacquelyn Baas and Mary Jacob observe that Whitman’s poetry has many ‘Buddhist tendencies: a strong emphasis on non-dualism; a feeling for emptiness; an antagonism to origins and ends as vampires of the present; a cosmological sense of interconnectedness; and so on.’ His masterpiece “Song of Myself”, for instance, serves as a good illustration of this. The beginning of the poem not only shows the speaker’s optimism and sympathy toward others, but it also renders his sincere belief in man’s potential that everyone has the ability to be fulfilled in his own virtue:

I CELEBRATE myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.

The metaphor which describes that the self is composed of atoms, and the subsequent notion of humility are of spiritual significance. This suggests that the speaker of the poem thoroughly sees life as an object which is impermanent and flowing, and more importantly, every life falls under this universal truth. Very similarly, Buddhism believes that the self is merely a congregate of substances, which are in incessant motion and then empty. The life of self is thus impermanent and nonexistent. With regard to this particular idea, at least Whitman’s poetry can, in this way, be said to be in accordance with central Buddhist teachings of impermanence and emptiness.

Like the other Transcendentalists, Whitman did not fail to regard nature as a source of spiritual energy and activity. In the same poem, the speaker’s mind is found to be at peace when he liberates his soul amidst nature:

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.

The rest of the poem describes the speaker's body, materials, other people and feelings with which he is in contact. The philosophy underlying this is the interaction between the outer sphere (i.e. materials) and the inside (i.e. the soul). While vivid descriptions of the outer sphere throughout this lengthy poem indicate his deliberate involvement in the concrete, visible world, an awareness of the deep soul and self-realisation is always present, suggesting both an abandonment of material concerns and an attention to inner calmness. In the end, the speaker's epiphany is revealed:

Clear and sweet is my soul,
and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul.

To a degree, it can be concluded that Whitman's poetry shares common interests with a number of important Buddhist teachings, particularly emptiness and the opposition between self and non-self. The tone of his poems is fairly meditative and peaceful, even though some of his poems are meant to describe his own experiences and feelings and are not always found to display a direct relation to Buddhism. In particular, his proclamation that exhibits his capability in understanding his soul can be regarded as 'immediate realisation [which] is the sole criterion of truth in Buddhism' (Nārada Mahā Thera, 1973). Also as a model for modern American literature, Whitman seems to have the most influence on later American Buddhist writers, especially those who convey their Buddhist understanding in autobiographical and confessional poetry. As Baas and Jacob (2004) maintain, Whitman appears to be 'the origin of Ginsberg's tradition.' To conclude, Whitman not only engaged with Buddhism in a distinctive way, but he also expressed his engagement in poetry in a different manner, paving the path for a new understanding and form of Buddhist poetry to emerge almost a century later.

Modernism

Before Buddhist philosophy regained its highest popularity in American writing through the Beat poets during the 1950's, this Eastern religion trod on so winding a road in this country and elsewhere alike. By having said that metaphorically, I mean that Buddhism has undergone changes, both gradual and drastic, and at last assumed a new character, due to a variety of factors, which many scholars unanimously call this phenomenon 'Buddhist modernism'. Since this transitional period is important to understand both the development of Buddhism in America and its modern literature up to the present time, a discussion of this phenomenon is offered here. In order to take a more panoramic view, my discussion takes the form of three parts, which are, first, the history and causes of such a new character of Buddhism, second, its definition and features, and third, its eventual effects on and reception into modern American Buddhist literature.

First, as discussed just earlier, after the Orientalist scholars in the nineteenth century paved a way for re-study of Buddhism because either it was studied mainly through translated texts, or it was misinterpreted or misused in certain cases due to the

overgeneralisation of Orientalism to all Eastern thoughts and traditions, Buddhism was in effect seriously reinvestigated by the scholars in the subsequent generation in the *different* manner. As J.J. Clarke (1997) puts it, ‘both scholars and religious seekers [of the twentieth century] went East precisely in order to acquire direct knowledge, or even enlightenment itself’. At this time, there appeared certain figures who made an impact on the reception of Buddhism in the west through their teachings and also practices, for example, D.T. Suzuki, Vivekananda, Tagore, and ChÖgyam Trungpa. However, there are indeed more complicated factors that contribute to such an emergence. The most apparent causes include political, social and cultural, and scientific movements. While David McMahan (2012) maintains that this happening arose ‘to counter threats from imperial power and missionaries’ from the colonial period, J.J. Clarke argues that due to the fact that the modern world ‘produced a deep sense of uncertainty and anxiety,’ ones then ‘call[s] into question of traditional beliefs and values, and the relativising of all world views’.

To be more specific, since Buddhism in the British colony especially in Ceylon, or Sri Lanka at present, was regarded as superstitious, idolatrous and pessimistic by the British empire, revivalists attempted to adapt Buddhism in order to meet the Western rational and scientific thinking, so that their Buddhism could regain its prestige and political power. Otherwise, Christianity could have become more dominant in this Buddhist region. Meanwhile, on the contrary, the over-preoccupation with the European Enlightenment which emphasised too much on scientific rationalism surprisingly urged the people ‘to explore new values and world views’.

Second, the consequences of all the aforementioned factors, when combined together, have led to the coming of Buddhist modernism. Among the scholars, the most precise and arresting definition together with its characteristics is also, I think, given by David McMahan and Donald Lopez. In his 2008 book *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, McMahan says that Buddhist modernism is ‘a dynamic, complex, and plural set of historical processes with loose bond and fuzzy boundaries’, and four years later with a more definite notion in another important book, he says that Buddhist modernism is, indeed, ‘the various forms of Buddhism that have been significantly shaped by an engagement with the dominant cultural and intellectual forces of modernity’, or in other words, it is ‘a hybrid religious and cultural form that combines selected elements of Buddhism with the major Western discourses and practices of modernity.’

Those engagements, or to be more precise, adaptations, in my own words, of Buddhism in this era have created certain new features and then added them to this new form of Buddhism, which, they both claim, significantly differs from those of the original teachings. McMahan and Lopez (2002) agree that Buddhist modernism ‘stresses equality over hierarchy’ and aligns with modern conceptions such as ‘reason, empiricism, science, universalism, individualism, tolerance, freedom and the rejection of religious orthodoxy’. At this particular point, I am also in accord with their both points, because Buddhism expounds universal truths and the way to notice them by themselves in order to attain ultimate liberation through one’s practice. However, such

an observation in the change in Buddhist modernism should be apprehended in the most appropriate sense. In my personal view, it is not that the modernity brought about the development of such already inherent features of the new form of Buddhism. The Buddha's teachings, in fact, were, have been and will be universal, individualistic and empirical, as they mentioned; it *is* that his teachings are undermined or even distorted by some practitioners at a certain time. To reiterate, as true Buddhist practitioners are well aware, the Buddha's teachings are *akaligo*, that is, ultimately true and regardless of time or person.

As far as the new form of Buddhist modernism is concerned, it is somewhat as complicated to pinpoint its defining features as the modernity itself, which varies from one society to another and also one context to another. However, most scholars recognise the hybridisation of Buddhism and modern concepts, in addition to the much less attachment to its ritual and hierarchy. The concrete examples which best reveal the convergence of the two philosophies include the exploitation of Buddhism for political movement, the application of Buddhism into environmentalism, the use of Buddhist meditation as an alternative psychological therapy to conventional medicine, and the incorporation of Buddhist teachings into modern literature.

Third, with specific regard to modern American literature, the development and hybridisation of Buddhist modernism is seen even more apparent. One important issue is that the modern writers present more practical aspects of Buddhist teachings than their predecessors. This is largely because the global crisis demands people to seek 'a new and purified consciousness' (Clarke, 1997), in order not only to heal all their sicknesses, but to develop themselves as a human being to the utmost potential which is unprecedented in their beliefs. That is to say, a person can truly liberate himself as the Buddha said and made himself as the greatest example. Buddhist teachings such as stillness, mind awareness, suchness, impermanence and selflessness, then, become recurrent themes in the works of some modern writers. For example, Clarke observes that W. B. Yeats, who was associated with Eastern philosophy through his engagement with the Theosophical Society in London, discovered the inseparable interaction between the mind and the body, the first of which has innate ability to discover such truth and other truths beyond. McMahan highlights the awareness of all things in Hermann Hesse's novel *Siddhartha*, in which, he claims, is the label of modern Buddhism, which is 'antiauthoritarian, skeptical of rites and devotionism, and fiercely individualist'. He also mentions the works of D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and Martin Heidegger which are influenced by Zen in the ways that they all attempt to present 'a redirection of attention to the concrete. According to Zen, this is 'experience' which is personal, unsophisticated, related to things and absolute (Suzuki, 1964). In this article, my discussion of this transitional period specifically looks at the works of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, both of whom are influenced by the important figure Earnest Fenollosa, and more importantly, are considered to have most impact on the writers of the Beat generation who are the main areas of this study.

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

Even though Fenollosa's essay *The Chinese Written Character As A Medium For Poetry* stirred arguments among professional sinologists as to whether his idea that 'the pictographic nature of the Chinese diagram was ideal for poetry' (Fields, 2013) was faulty, Pound was inspired by his work and alternatively saw an interesting point in it, stating that:

The early Chinese poets were a treasury to which the next centuries may look for as great a stimulus as the Renaissance had from Greeks. ... The first step of a renaissance, or awakening, is the importation of models for painting, sculpture, and writing. ... The last century discovered the Middle Ages. It is possible that this century may find a new Greece in China.

Pound did not share all the same ideas as Fenollosa, however. Particularly, Pound did not agree with Fenollosa's conviction expressed in his work *The Epochs* that 'The poetical wealth of the man and of his day is proved by the fact that nature, man, ethics, Taoist fancies and Buddhist devotion, all enter his verses as natural friends, and all pushing with sympathy toward the social betterment and freedom of man' (Fields, 2013). Buddhist philosophy in the writings of Pound is not as intense and self-contained as those in Fenollosa's works. Indeed, Pound is known as a modern poet whose 'interest in a wide range of literary cultures determined him in ambition to find common ground between the writings of apparently alien cultures' (Jones, 1980). The incorporation of oriental thoughts in his poem derives mainly from his fascination with and translations of Chinese poetry as well as his reading of Fenollosa's writings.

For example, one of his works that reflect this Eastern interest is *The Cantos*, one of the most important epic poems in the twentieth century. Pound's *The Cantos* is a complex, extensively long poem of 800 pages with a variety of concerns, which he himself called 'a poem containing history' (Terrell, 1993). Indeed, it is more than a history; it describes various encounters, physically and spiritually, which then forms a collective contemplation in the reader's mind. As George Kearns (1989) puts it, it is 'distinctly a didactic poem [which] invites us to accompany its pilgrim/poet on a difficult, non-linear journey out of darkness towards light, in the course of which we meet innumerable examples of the blessed and the damned, as well as of every gradation between.' Based on this particular point, Pound's *The Cantos* is seen to have incorporated aspects of oriental philosophy, especially in the part of the *China Cantos*. Confucius, a great ancient Chinese philosopher, is one of the moral personae in *The Cantos* and, as observed by Greg Barnhisel (2012), Pound 'compares the moral precepts of the West, especially those of Aristotle, against Confucian ideals and finds the West's lacking'. Barnhisel maintains further that what might mostly capture Pound's interest in Confucius is 'the visual power of Chinese characters or ideographs [...] and the conveyance of meaning depended in part on the skill with which the word was drawn.' The following excerpt from XCIX shows his belief in the Confucian

doctrine that emphasises the precise verbal definitions, which later influences Pound's writings:

To discriminate things
.....
To see the light pour,
 that is, toward sinceritas
of the word, comprehensive

However, the influences of Confucius and other Chinese doctrines, such as Taoism, on Pound's writings need to be questioned. Despite the fact that their philosophy mainly concerns ethics and morality, which is quintessential in the Eastern world, particularly in China, it is not exactly consonant with Buddhist thinking. There are some common principles which are shared, for example, the principle of calmness or stillness, but the difference also remains. One distinction to be made is that Buddhist stillness is the foundation for higher wisdom and true liberation. Hence, when Pound expresses calmness in his *Canto XXXVI* (1975), the important question is as to wonder whether it is Buddhist:

He himself moveth not, drawing all to his stillness,
Neither turneth about to seek his delight
Nor yet to seek out proving
Be it so great or so small.

In fact, Britton Gildersleeve (1999) points out that *The Cantos* and Pound himself are 'anti-Buddhist', based on the extensive appearance of derogatory words which refer to Buddhism, such as "Bhudmess" (54/282), "hochangs" (54/287), "Bhud-foés" (98/707), and "Bhudrot" (99/717). Pound believes that 'Buddhism's emphasis on the transience and unimportance of the temporal and worldly—in contrast to Confucianism's focus on the sociopolitical matrix – is, for him, unacceptable.'

In my view, despite the fact that Buddhist philosophy is misunderstood and, therefore, distorted in *The Cantos*, its importance has considerable influence on later American writers, 'ranging from the Buddhist poet Gary Snyder to the southern nature poet Charles Wright', as observed by Greg Barnhisel. Perhaps, indeed, Pound's misinterpretation of Buddhism accelerates more careful re-study of this religion in American literature.

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

A contemporary of Pound, T.S. Eliot began his first profession as a philosopher, and later poet and critic. With regard to his life philosophy, 'his distaste for the material world was expressed in his writing as ascetic withdrawal, a disencumbering, in order to approach the spiritual quest undiminished' (Jones, 1980). This distaste led him to other sources of meaning of life, and as a consequence, new gained ideas from Eastern

religion are present in many of his works. For instance, Cleanth Brooks (1952) suggests that ‘the Sanskrit words in Eliot’s concluding section of “The Waste Land” contain the oldest and most permanent truth of race.’ Philip Wheelwright (1952) observes that ‘Eliot’s sure catalytic instinct, here [“The Dry Savages”] furnishing the main philosophical theme of the poem, has been to synthesize the Hindu idea of rebirth through self-disciplined and reverent concentration.’

As for Buddhism in particular, a number of his works indicate his dedicated study of as well as special interests in such Buddhist teachings as impermanence, suffering and suchness. As P. S. Sri (1985) observes, the title of the poem “The Fire Sermon” in his *The Waste Land* is taken from the Buddha’s Fire Sermon, a well-known discourse in the Buddhist Canon, and the first poem in *Four Quartets* alludes to a lotus which is the symbol of the ultimate reality, in which Eliot describes: ‘And the lotus rose, quietly, quietly/The surface glittered out of heart of light.’ In *Ash Wednesday* (1963), Eliot’s understanding of the Buddhist concepts of suchness and non-attachment is revealed to a surprising degree:

Because I know that time is always time
And place is always place and only place
And what is actual is actual only for one time
And only for one place
I rejoice that things are as they are.

Again, the caution should be borne in mind that, despite extensive allusions to spiritual substance of the religion, Eliot’s writing is not definitely Buddhist. He himself says that ‘I am not a Buddhist, but some of the early Buddhist scriptures affect me as parts of the Old Testament’ (Sri, 1985). His intellectual approach to studying Buddhism and his strong faith in Christianity must be acknowledged. Like the Transcendentalists, Eliot incorporated a wide variety of notable philosophies, cultures, as well as arts, in his writings, so the appearance of Buddhism takes shape as a complementary element. Like Pound, the mystery of the philosophy of Buddhism, perhaps, occupies him so strongly that he was distracted from what is actually practiced and realised in this religion.

The Beat Generation

Not until the mid-twentieth century did widespread interest in Buddhism take place again in the United States of America. In fact, as Stephen Fredman (2005) describes, this period is filled with ‘a broad range of religious and quasi-religious phenomena,’ to which he chooses the specific term ‘mysticism’ to apply. There are three main sorts of mysticism: neo-paganism, Christianity, and Buddhism, the last of which, Fredman specifically points out, ‘gain[s] a surprisingly strong foothold in American poetry of the second half of the century—particularly the schools of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism’ (Seager, 1999).

During that time, there was a group of young bohemians known as the Beats, who were the first to dedicate themselves to Buddhist practice and then, upon their success, to 'indigenize the dharma through literary means' (Seager, 1999). In essence, they effected two revolutionary changes. The first change concerns their approach to investigating this Eastern religion. In addition to the use of the intellect, their main method was practice, which is the key to understanding the teachings of the Buddha. As the well-known Buddhist scholar Edward Conze (1969) maintains, the direction to Buddhist thinking can be called *pragmatism*, the process by which 'the value of a thought is to be judged by what you can do with it, by the quality of the life which results from it.' The second change was the role of Buddhism in American verse; that is, this religion became the principal concept and practice by itself. As discussed previously, the works of Transcendentalist and modern writers indicate the supporting, or at best complementary, role of Buddhist philosophy in assisting to expound their existing views which have close connections with well-established western values, especially those of Christianity and rationalism. Based on the literary evidence, as Roy Pearce (1961) asserts, 'American poetry from the seventeenth century to the present is on the whole a development of the Puritan imagination.' The incorporation of Buddhist philosophy in early American literature is, therefore, less significant than in the twentieth-century period. As a result of these significant changes, the Beat Buddhist-inflected poetry is more engaged with the substance of Buddhist spiritualism.

Some of the most important Beat poets are Allen Ginsberg, as the group's chief spokesperson, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. Meanwhile, another group of intellectuals, the *San Francisco School*, who were also fascinated with Eastern philosophy and religions, including Chinese and Japanese poetry, decided to fuse with the Beats. The San Francisco School poets who joined them were Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Diane Di Prima. After their writings were launched to the public, the Beats enjoyed enormous popularity. Their works are widely read, reprinted many times and studied both inside and outside America, and finally have become epitomes of American Buddhist poetry, which sets a new trend in American literature in the modern period.

Some Beat writers, such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Philip Whalen, have now passed away, and others such as Gary Snyder and Diane Di Prima are still alive. However, they are all remembered through their writings, and for various reasons. One of the most important reasons is that they expand the horizon of American people by introducing Buddhism in their writings, and some of them serve as good examples of Buddhist practitioners. Nowadays, there is a new group of poets known as the Postbeat poets, who are direct descendants of the Beat Generation. Some famous members include Anne Waldman, Andy Clausen, Jim Cohn, and David Cope, among others. It can then be said that Buddhist poetry is continuously crafted in America since its reception by its writers up to today.

Asian Buddhist Poetry

This section primarily aims to identify some main characteristics of Asian Buddhist poetry in order to provide more explanation as to how American Buddhist poetry is different from this material and develops its own character. The investigation looks specifically at two main components, the portrayal of Buddhist teachings and some of its poetic styles. The Buddhist teachings which they have in common in their writing, such as meditation and enlightenment need not be explored fully here, but their differences are more interesting. Besides the ultimate realisation, one of the aspects of common ground that needs to be taken into consideration regards the ethical understanding of Asian Buddhist writers. This moral behavior not only controls a practitioner when he practises meditation or other Buddhist religious ceremonies, but it also directs his thoughts and actions while engaging in other situations and actions, including when Buddhist poetry is to be written. As a consequence, most Asian Buddhist poets do not usually allow their lustful desire to appear in their writings. Nevertheless, it is not that the poet's experience is impermissible, as long as it does not arouse an unethical desire which can lead to misconduct or impure thoughts.

Buddhism in Asia and its literature have influenced American writers since the 1800s. Nowadays, Zen has most impact on its writers. Some aspects of Tibetan poetry are borrowed, and the influence of Buddhist poetry of the Theravadan tradition is also present, although relatively less than the other two branches. Here, some representative poems of the four cultures of Buddhism i.e. Chinese, Zen, Tibetan and Theravadan are provided to illustrate their typical features, and are also used to compare with those of American Buddhist poetry.

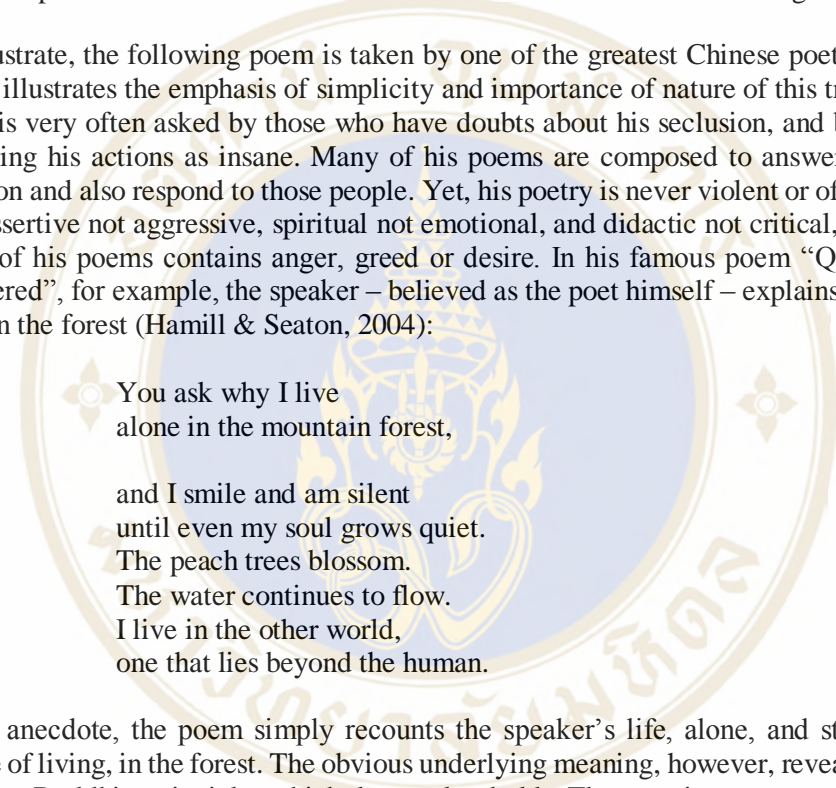
Chinese Buddhist Poetry

Chinese Buddhist poetry has long had an influence on American literature and on contemporary American Buddhist poetry. Famous classical Chinese poets like Li Po, Tu Fu, Han Shan, Su Tung-p'o, to name just a few, become a widespread interest, and their works are translated by many American writers, including Gary Snyder, Sam Hamill, Mike O'Connor, Arthur Sze, Eliot Weinberger and Shin Yu Pai (Schelling, 2005). For the influence of Chinese poetry on the American Buddhist poets in particular, the publication of Snyder's *Cold Mountain* (1965) in which Han Shan's poems are translated, Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *The Dharma Bums* with reference to Han Shan descendants and Buddhist enlightenment, and Jane Hirshfield's "Reading Chinese Poetry Before Dawn", offer the most concrete and substantial accounts.

With regard to poetics, like any other Asian Buddhist poetry, Chinese Buddhist poetry conforms to its traditional versification. The three most popular verse patterns are the modern-style *lu-shih* (regulated verse), the regulated *shih-chu* (cut-lines), and the old style *ku-shih*. The regulated verse form consists of eight lines of five or seven characters in each line and requires an end rhyme and two inner couplets, the cut-lines form is a quatrain with the same metrical rules as the regulated verse kind, and the old

style has five or eight characters in each line, but its length is not fixed (O'Connor & Johnson, 2002). Due to the fact that each Chinese character has various powerful meanings, its poetry is rather short but self-contained and complete. This Chinese poetic prosody appears to be imitated in American Buddhist poetry, especially its principle of economy and precision of word choice. Unluckily, when Chinese poems are translated or adapted into English, word-by-word equivalents are hard to find, so the first priority is given to deliver the message. However, the attempt to make it short and retain its metrical rules is still obvious. This is one reason why most American Buddhist poems contain in each line fewer words and have no definite length.

To illustrate, the following poem is taken by one of the greatest Chinese poets Li Po, which illustrates the emphasis of simplicity and importance of nature of this tradition. Li Po is very often asked by those who have doubts about his seclusion, and by those regarding his actions as insane. Many of his poems are composed to answer such a question and also respond to those people. Yet, his poetry is never violent or offensive. It is assertive not aggressive, spiritual not emotional, and didactic not critical, indeed. None of his poems contains anger, greed or desire. In his famous poem “Questions Answered”, for example, the speaker – believed as the poet himself – explains why he lives in the forest (Hamill & Seaton, 2004):



You ask why I live
alone in the mountain forest,

and I smile and am silent
until even my soul grows quiet.
The peach trees blossom.
The water continues to flow.
I live in the other world,
one that lies beyond the human.

As an anecdote, the poem simply recounts the speaker's life, alone, and states his choice of living, in the forest. The obvious underlying meaning, however, reveals some common Buddhist principles which the speaker holds. The most important message is the realisation of the mind, as clearly expressed in the second stanza, and perhaps the possible transcendence when the speaker claims to live in the other world. This strongly suggests the true liberation in which the mind is calm and free from suffering – i.e. the goal of Buddhism. The other striking characteristic of this poem is a presentation of a meticulous awareness of nature. Although the speaker says that the forest is his abode, natural environments are not taken for granted. The speaker clearly tells the existence and flowing of nature around him. This perception corresponds to a deliberate awareness of the outer world, which American poets have in common with him. In fact, the majority of Li Po's poems employ the nature around him as the setting of the poem, suggesting not only his harmony with nature, but also a natural peace.

The next excerpts, which are in the form of a correspondence between Shenshui and Hui Neng, the two most influential Buddhist masters and poets, illustrate further the typical characteristics of Chinese poetry. The first poem is written by Shenshui (Hamill & Seaton, 2004):

This body is the Bodhi tree.
The mind is like a bright mirror.
Polish it and keep it clean,
let no dust mote settle here.

Then Hui Neng replies:

There is no Bodhi tree.
No bright mirror exists.
Since all is emptiness,
where could a dust mote settle?

According to their conversation, Shenshui and Hui Neng have different views of investigating the truth. While the first poem indicates a more accessible approach in which Shenshui compares the mind to a ‘bright mirror’ which needs to be ‘polished’ to keep it clean at all times, a different Buddhist point of view is required to understand Hui Neng’s philosophy that everything is empty, so nothing should be clung to. In other words, the concept of ‘let go’ is better applied to Hui Neng’s message. In my opinion, even though both poets suggest different ways to practice dharma, they have the same aim of achieving enlightenment.

Zen Poetry

The next Buddhist poetry to account for the development of American Buddhist poetry comes from Zen. As Zen Buddhism places supreme importance on seeing into one’s nature which is impermanent and empty in everyday life, Zen poetry is involved mainly with the ‘expressions of the Formless Self at the most significant moments in life, of satori [awakening] and death respectively’ (Stryk, Ikemoto & Takayama, 1973). Zen also believes that ‘the divine unity of the universe permits one to search for the fulfillment of one’s deepest being through fusing with nature, [so] life in a Zen monastery is immersed in nature’ (Dumoulin, Heisig & Knitter, 2005). Zen poetry is, therefore, involved with and dependent upon nature, from which self-realisation is derived.

To illustrate, Matsuo Bashō’s popular poem “Narrow Road to the Interior” is discussed here. A notable Japanese poet, Bashō is well known for his poetry of natural reflection, and in this poem in particular, his meticulous observation is vividly and meaningfully shown (Hamill & Seaton, 2004):

All the long night
salt-winds drive
storm-tossed waves
and moonlight drips
through Shigoshi pines.

The direct relation to the Buddhist mind may not be easy to discern, but the contemplation of the environment which the poet implies can enable the reader to become still and aware of his surroundings and his own presence. The continuity of carefully acknowledging the movement of the physical world, but not taking any involvement in it, as the poem shows, establishes peace of mind, which, in effect, increases an understanding of nature and the mind itself. In addition, rather than being merely a narrative poem, it invites the reader to investigate the physical world it describes, creating a moment when calmness is required to gain realisation. For me, this poem of Bashō serves as an alternative foundation to achieving self-realisation upon a close observation of nature.

Metrically, Zen poetry has no rigid verse patterns, is unnecessary to include any religious terms, and can be written by both monks and laymen. However, similar to Chinese Buddhist poetry, Zen poetry often preserves the rule of economy with words of no more than five words in each line. The words themselves are simple, direct and expressive, and they are intended to reveal the discovery of the speaker's epiphany. The most noticeable characteristic of Zen poetry is its sharp and sudden revelation of spiritual message, as well as the method to convey it. As Lucien Stryk (1973) puts it, Zen poems contain dynamism in order to 'sharpen the discerning eye' of the reader to penetrate into the abstract truth.

To illustrate the concept of dynamism and sudden epiphany, the following poem by Emperor Fushima is provided (Hamill & Seaton, 2004):

Only now I know
that power—greater than storms—
a heart-rending awe
silencing all the pines
at nightfall on the mountain.

In accordance with Zen philosophy, this poem clearly presents the most critical moment of the speaker when he discovers, within his internal real self, inherent wisdom. The most powerful personal experience, he describes as 'a heart-rending awe' and that power surpassing everything surrounding him, is rapturous. This five-line poem has no end rhyme, noticeable regular rhythm, or elevated diction, but its striking charm lies in the simple expression of the greatest human experience.

Tibetan Buddhist poetry

This Asian Buddhist poetry concerns a number of religious subjects, ranging from moral conduct, the history of the Buddha, devotion to the lama, past and future life and karma, to meditation, altruism and the mind of enlightenment. My observation is that Tibetan Buddhist poetry is usually instructive, personal, intimate and rather lengthy.

Of all Tibetan Buddhist poets, Jetsun Miralepa, a renowned saint, and Dalai lamas are the best known for their expressions of the subtlety of this branch. Here are the two most famous poems by two of them. The first excerpt is from “Closing Verse” by Miralepa. The poem begins with a self-introduction of the speaker, perhaps the poet himself. Who he is and where he comes from is told to forecast a spiritual scene (Kungpa & Cutillo, 1995):

I'm a yogi who wanders the countryside,
A beggar who travels alone,
A pauper who's got nothing.

I left behind the land of my birth,
Turned my back on my own fine house,
And gave up my fertile fields.

According to the poem, the speaker, like the Buddha, abandons secular enjoyment and wealth and embarks on a spiritual journey. He desires to share his experience with others, not asking them to live in the same condition, but perhaps provoking them to consider a useful way of life. Stylistically, the poet employs the story-telling technique to attract readers and then instructs them:

There's no telling the day of my death,
But I have a purpose before I die.
That's the story of me, the yogi;
Now I'll give *you* some advice:

Then the speaker's philosophy is explained in plain language through his guidance. The readers are urged to act accordingly. Based upon the Buddhist teachings, the speaker believes in and practices self-control, wisdom and interdependence:

Trying to control the events of this life,
Trying and trying to be so clever,
Always planning to manipulate your world,
Involved in repetitive social relations—
In the midst of these preparations for the future

Finally, as an adviser, he tells the benefits of choosing this way of living – that is, to live in contentment. In addition, the poem indicates the Buddhist belief in ‘rebirth’, but

it is, as suggested by the speaker, not more important than the present life. The tone of the poem is even more instructive, persuasive, but not coercive:

Not knowing where rebirth will occur,
You still maintain a complacent contentment
Now's the time to get ready for death—
That's my sincere advice to you;
If its import strikes you, start your practice.

The Dalai Lama, the highest teacher and head of the Dharma in Tibet, is believed to be the reincarnation of bodhisattva (an enlightened being or existence) to enlighten others (Williams, 2004). He is most revered by his devotees and thus becomes an influential figure in exclusively all kinds of affairs, including politics, education and society. Because of his omnipotent power, the Dalai Lama's writings attract a wide public interest, and as such, the interpretation of his works is considerable and various.

The following poem is taken by the sixth Dalai Lama, Tsangyang Gyatso, who was in love with his friend before entering the Tibetan spiritual realm. The shocking and arresting aspect of the poem lies in his honest confession of love to his woman, instead of visualising his guru, while he is practicing (Williams, 2004):

Meditating – in mind,
No lama's face appears,
Unbidden, lover's face
In mind, so clearly clear

However, not only the poem indicates his observation of the internal visualisation, albeit invariably wrongly, but it also suggests, as the poem proceeds, this Dalai Lama's strong wish to become enlightened in this present life. With that constant awareness and sudden right wisdom, he then resolutely abandons his secular love in order to attain Buddhahood:

With thoughts on religion
That were ever for her,
One lifetime, one body –
I become a Buddha!

Theravadan Buddhist Poetry

Theravadan Buddhist poetry is mostly written by monks and Buddhist poets in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and the southern parts of China. This tradition of poetry reflects their strong beliefs in the Buddha's teachings, particularly concerning the freeing mind, as well as ethics and wisdom. The delivery of the Buddhist teaching is more direct and instructive than any tradition of Buddhist poetry.

The first poem is taken from the Buddha's teaching contained in the Tripitaka, the Buddhist Canon, translated in the book of Nārada Mahā Thera (1973), a Sri Lankan monk and Buddhist scholar:

“By oneself alone is evil done: by oneself is one defiled.
By oneself alone is evil avoided: by oneself alone is one purified.
Purity and impurity depend on oneself.
No one can purify another.”

This second poem is from one of the most revered Thai monks, Buddhadasa Bhikku (2014):

Oh happiness!
Everyone keeps running in search of thee;
“You're happy, and so am I, for eternity.”
Yet our faces remain pale and suspected.

If we burn craving, then we should be happy,
But if it smoulders us, we are sure ablaze;
Look! Do not take their word for it, yet
Probe if such happiness is in peace or in heat.

Needless to explain the Buddhist philosophy in the two poems above as it is clearly and directly portrayed to their readership, the delivery method and poetic versification are of more interest. The two poems demonstrate a noticeable rhyme scheme: the first *aabc* and the second *abba, baac*. The rhythm is quite regular and it contributes to a fresh impetus to the reality and encouragement of the message. While the first poem uses simple but powerful words, ‘oneself’, ‘evil’, ‘defiled’ and ‘purified’ to instruct the reader, the second poem includes rhetorical devices such as the personification of happiness, tone of voice, and vivid imagery to produce more effects to the poem.

So far, it can be summarised that the different traditions of Asian Buddhist poetry use their own methods to convey Buddhist philosophy. Because they have different cultures and approaches to the study and practice of the religion, their Buddhist poetry places different emphases. However, all of them share the same aim – to assist the reader to understand the Buddha's teaching and to gain more understanding of higher truths. Chinese Buddhist and Zen poetry focus on the real self and harmony with nature; Tibetan Buddhist poetry, albeit sometimes presenting seemingly secular affairs, is involved primarily with the intention to assist the readers to become more contemplative; and the poetry of Theravadan Buddhism, such as that from Thailand and Sri Lanka, thematises other teachings, including the purification of the mind which is considered as the firm foundation for calmness and the requisite step to self-realisation. Other Buddhist teachings and concepts, such as compassion, emptiness and interdependence, also appear to be recurrent themes of Asian Buddhist poetry. These themes are all presented to assist in lifting and preparing the reader's mind to the

highest level and to the enlightened state in the end. It is also shown that most Asian Buddhist poets preserve their traditional poetic patterns while attempting to deliver their Buddhist messages at the same time. It then seems that Asian Buddhist poetry has quite a rigid frame, or others may call it restriction, to deliver message in accordance with the Buddhist practice. It is, however, a misconception that Buddhist poets are not at liberty to develop their own way of delivery and writing styles. To reiterate, as long as it is intended to assist readers to acquire understanding of life in accordance with the Buddhist principle, Buddhist poetry can be written through a variety of perspectives and forms.

American Buddhist Poetry vs Asian Buddhist Poetry

At first glance, the two main differences between these two cultures of Buddhist poetry lie in the approach to delivering spiritual message and the emphasis on ethical conduct, which is considered as one of the foundations of the spiritual life, along with right concentration and wisdom (Gethin, 1998). The Asian verse is shown to present Buddhist truths more directly with its strong didactic aims and its adherence to the Buddhist code of conduct, than the American counterpart, which places more emphasis on individual spirit and enjoys more freedom to express personal emotions, feelings and actions, whether good or bad, and secular or spiritual. To a certain degree, these two issues are interrelated in the way that the poet's personal life and experiences have certain effects on the meaning as well as the reader's interpretation of the poem.

As shown by the poems illustrated previously, Asian poets are more straightforward to expound any Buddhist teachings even though they are sometimes inaccessible due to the abstractness of the teachings themselves. The teachings of impermanence, emptiness and selflessness, and the way to transcendence, for example, are exemplified by the poet's experiences, but there are no references to unethical actions and thoughts. Even though they, at times, seem to present unwholesome behaviours, they are shown to underscore the adverse effects of these actions and call for improvement.

To give another example, the poem "Written in the Tune of 'An Immortal Approaching the River'" by Su Tung-p'o is provided here. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker recounts what he has done (Hamill & Seaton, 2004):

WINE at East Bank tonight, sobered up
then started over, getting drunk again.

In the last two lines of the poem, he clearly expresses regret and wishes:

I hate it!—that even this body's not mine alone ...
Someday I'll give it all up.

On the other hand, the incorporation of misconduct as guilt that is accompanied by the wish to improve in American Buddhist poetry is rare to see. The American kind is full

of inappropriate or socially unacceptable behaviors, such as expression of anger, greed, confusion, sex and violence, and they are depicted more as everyday activities or common human feelings than as something that should be controlled and then improved. In fact, American Buddhist poetry has a relatively more indirect approach to conveying Buddhist philosophy. In addition to the individual poet's personal experiences, the vivid descriptions of natural environment and the variety of subject matters, such as politics, society and materialism, create a differently engaging mood for the poetry. Instead of taking readers directly to the essence of Buddhism, American Buddhist poetry lets them immerse themselves in the incessant flow of nature by observing the outer world that the poet experiences, informs them of the current issue of personal affairs, and then allows them to return to their own internal realm.

It may be inaccurate to say that those personal descriptions and other social matters are not meant to convey messages that help explain Buddhist teachings. However, for uninitiated readers, such unethical behaviors can suggest that moral conduct is not a requirement for Buddhist practitioners. In a number of American Buddhist poems, descriptions of the poets' personal anecdotes, experience and feelings are often employed to open the poem, but their relation to Buddhist ethics is still hard to identify. In fact, this 'loose' setting is more or less intended to put readers in the background. For example, Gary Snyder starts his poem "Working on the 58's Willys Pickup: for Lu Yu" with descriptions of what the speaker does (Schelling, 2005):

This year this truck was made
I sat in early morning darkness
Chanting sūtra in Kyoto,
And spent the days studying Chinese.

The poem continues to recount what happens to the speaker: 'I lie in the dusty and broken bush/Under the pickup', and it finally ends with another event in his life: 'I fix truck and lock eyebrows/With tough-handed men of the past' (Schelling, 2005). Apparently, the beginning of the poem gives a general background rather than making any relation to spirituality. In this way, American Buddhist poetry functions as a confessional poem with an aim to narrate incidents, feelings, and beliefs which do not require anything but the reader's deep contemplation and ability to relate the stories in the poem to Buddhist meanings. This presentation can be perplexing.

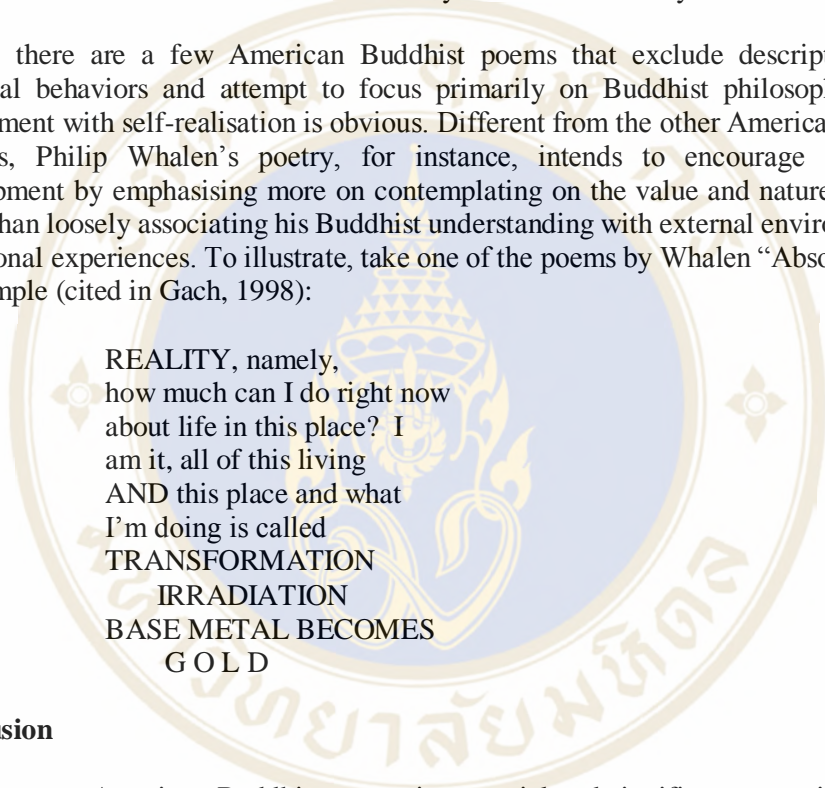
However, occasionally, some American Buddhist poems seem to be directly spiritually involved. They ask the reader provoking questions to ponder. But again, the relation between the questions and the essence of Buddhist teaching is hard to identify, and it is found to be difficult for readers to internalise by themselves. For instance, Diane Di Prima casts doubt in the third stanza of her "Three "Dharma Poems"" (Schelling, 2005):

my faith –
what is it
but the ancient dreams

of wild ones
in the mountains?

When compared to the poem by Li Po discussed earlier, this poem is still less engaged with Buddhist enlightenment, although it may urge readers to think about their intuition. Such intuition does not show any direct relation to Buddhism, but can be construed as a close self-investigation. Instead, the teaching of the Chinese poet indicates enlightenment when he speaks of his life in the other world, and, meanwhile, implies spiritual transcendence when that world is beyond that of ordinary human.

Indeed, there are a few American Buddhist poems that exclude descriptions of unethical behaviors and attempt to focus primarily on Buddhist philosophy. The engagement with self-realisation is obvious. Different from the other American poets' writings, Philip Whalen's poetry, for instance, intends to encourage spiritual development by emphasising more on contemplating on the value and nature of life, rather than loosely associating his Buddhist understanding with external environments or personal experiences. To illustrate, take one of the poems by Whalen "Absolute" as an example (cited in Gach, 1998):



REALITY, namely,
how much can I do right now
about life in this place? I
am it, all of this living
AND this place and what
I'm doing is called
TRANSFORMATION
IRRADIATION
BASE METAL BECOMES
G O L D

Conclusion

Contemporary American Buddhist poetry is a special and significant genre in which Buddhist philosophy, originally from the East, is communicated to the West by the different poets, whose spiritual experiences and poetic creativity are amazingly extensive and diverse. As such, American Buddhist poems are more complicated than they look. As aforesaid, this genre is a synthesis of two cultures, and when it is intended to be read by American audience in particular, the poets decide to present and transform certain concepts in order that the reader can find their Buddhist verse more accessible and realistic. This contextually personalised technique can be seen as a form of cultural and poetic mediation which proves to be more or less effective for the Western audience, especially non-Buddhists, who will be able to acquire a better understanding of Buddhism and its abstract teachings through this familiar and tangible means.

More arrestingly, when a meticulous comparison is made, it appears that the nature of American Buddhist poetry is more flexible and diverse than the Asian counterpart with regard to the delivery of Buddhist teachings and poetic styles. Usually, a number of American poems present and clarify Buddhist truths by means of the poet's personal experiences, both secular and spiritual. However, while most American Buddhist poets convey their Buddhist understanding in a personal and less direct way, there are still some poems which respond directly to Buddhist philosophy and suggest the way to enlightenment. This is in part because American culture plays a crucial role in their Buddhist-inspired poetry, since their Buddhist poetry includes seemingly popular American interests such as sex, democracy, and freedom, some of which are seen as unconventional in traditional Buddhist poetry. In other words, Buddhist poetry is, to a large extent, americanised, and this practice is more as helpful and creative than as distortive and aberrant, in my view. This presentation suggests not only the diversity and creativity of this special genre of American literature, but also the principles of the poets that they, as it were, portray their profound understanding of Buddhist philosophy through the freedom to express their beliefs and experiences in poetic form.

Notes

¹ As for Schelling's, a poem is deliberately *made* in the way that the raw impulse, regardless of any form, is the start, and the task of refinement is always indispensable and limitless.

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