

Modernist Elements in Jane Hirshfield's Voice and Zen Meditation*

LING CHUNG

Like many American poets since the rise of Imagism in the 1910s, Jane Hirshfield (*1953) writes verse with concrete, vivid imagery. However, her imagery is tactfully linked to the control and the activity of the mind. Furthermore, her poems move beyond this early Modernist concern for imagery, for they are pregnant with spiritual awareness and insight into the human psyche. Take her short poem "The Clock" as an example:

Night pond,
its few leaves
floating:
absence-of-stars,
drifting over the surface.

But even
fallen things
disrupt each other.
Beauty, griefs turn over.
The leaves move
all night, slowly,
until they again are red. (Hirshfield, *Lives* 71)

On the surface, the poem focuses on the image of a few fallen leaves drifting on a small pond. It must be autumn, for their hue was red. They might have been sullied by dirt before they were blown to the pond. The title "The Clock" highlights the passing of time while "all night" indicates the duration. During the night, the leaves drifted and turned on the water until they were cleansed and the red hue was

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recovered. However, this analysis delineates merely the imagistic part of the text.

Several words are so deftly used that the sensory objects in the image become analogous to human experiences, so the image can be associated with one's subjectivity, and the reader is able to apprehend the mind of the speaker. Because of the word "things" in line 7, the leaves become analogous to human feelings that are evoked in the following lines by "beauty" and "griefs," because "fallen things" could refer either to the fallen leaves or to feelings in one's past. What, then, does "fallen things / disrupt each other" mean? Does it mean that the fallen leaves, while drifting, scratch against each other? Or the two feelings—the love for "beauty" and the "griefs" for its transience—"disrupt" each other? This implication reveals a probing into the conflict in the human psyche. Also, the word "its" in "its few leaves" in line 2 indicates the pond's ownership of the leaves. Why should the pond be possessive of the leaves? If the leaves are analogous to human feelings, can the pond be analogous to the mind? Does it imply that our mind is often obsessed with our feelings? The leaves move all night and finally are purged of the stains. Can it be said that in one's dream, memory of the beautiful and that of the grievous disrupt each other until the conflict is resolved? What about the ending lines in which the leaves "again are red": do the lines imply that all burning feelings will remain intact and will not pass into oblivion? Apparently, the poem is not just about the image of a few fallen leaves, but reveals the speaker's penetrating insight into the human psyche, feelings and experiences, and above all, this insight is expressed in a voice sung between the lines. The meaning behind the image is conveyed in a reticent voice.

The aim of this paper is to unravel the impact of Soto Zen meditation practice on Hirshfield's poetic voice, to show how her impersonal yet sometimes passionate, controlled yet free floating voice distinguishes itself from Modernist poets, and how her religious verse distinguishes itself from that of her predecessors, including Gary Snyder (*1930) and Philip Whalen (1923-2001), among others. There is

always a speaker in a poem who communicates with readers or imagined addressees. In this paper, the speaker will be called "the voice," following Samuel Maio, who says that "the voice is the speaker of the poem—not necessarily the poet, as is often wrongly assumed" (Maio 1). The voice is often "sincere," and is "a literary self," a substitute for the poet's "literal, historical self" (Maio 2). The poem "The Clock" contains not only strong Imagistic elements, but also insightful thoughts delivered by a unique voice, whereas, in an Imagist poem, the images form the main body, and they themselves can imply and cross-fertilize meanings. Ezra Pound's "In a Station of the Metro," for example, consists of none other than two images, and an association of these two—the faces in the crowd and the petals after a rain storm—can generate multiple meanings. In other words, in Pound's poem, the images themselves could speak while in Hirshfield's poems, such as "The Clock," it is the voice that speaks and the images become vessels carrying subjective experiences. In "The Clock," the voice never speaks out loud the mind and the feelings, but the meaning is suggested by a few intimating words pertaining to human emotion. As a result, Hirshfield's voice becomes unobtrusive and implicit.

How did Hirshfield attain this unobtrusive voice while presenting her spiritual awareness? This voice could be merely an artistic device that she employs. However, since the voice appears in so many of her poems, an inquiry into her life experiences may be edifying. Hirshfield herself admits that the impact of Zen Buddhism is enormous. In my interview with her in 2001, answering my question about the impact of Zen practice on her writing, she remarked: "As a young adult, from age 21 to age 29, I was doing this full time. Everything I do since then is influenced by it. So, I cannot separate out anything and say this is the way, because I think Zen practice, when it is done thoroughly, changes every cell. And so how can you speculate which cell might be some other way?" Furthermore, some key concepts of Hirshfield's poetics are clearly those of Zen Buddhism. In her essay, "Poetry and Mind of Concentration," she interprets the creation of a poem or a

piece of art thus: “True concentration appears—paradoxically—at the moment willed effort drops away. It is then that a person enters what scientist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has described as ‘flow’ and Zen calls ‘effortless effort’” (Hirshfield, *Nine Gates* 4). Key words in this passage such as “concentration” and “effortless effort” actually pertain to concepts of Zen Buddhism. Therefore, in order to ascertain the possible Zen impact on her unobtrusive poetic voice, the crucial experiences in her spiritual search will be traced.

When Hirshfield was an undergraduate student at Princeton University, she started to read books about Zen Buddhism. She went to a reception held in honor of Gary Snyder after his poetry reading on campus. She says: “He was the first Westerner I had ever seen who had done Zen practice. And I think he was an enormous influence on me, just from that one glimpse that I first time saw that it was possible, that a Westerner could do this” (Hirshfield Interview 2001). Later, she found out there was a Zen monastery located in the wilderness of Carmel Valley, California. In 1974, less than a year after she graduated from Princeton, she packed and drove across the continent to Carmel Valley and was admitted into Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Apparently, the simple, hard life and the strict Zen training in the monastery were precisely what she was looking for, and she said that “[e]verything was dismantled. All the cluttered distraction of modern life is taken away, if you go to a monastery in wilderness” (Hirshfield Interview 2005).

In the next seven odd years, Hirshfield was a serious Zen practitioner in Soto Sect monasteries ministered by San Francisco Zen Center. The major monasteries in the system of San Francisco Zen Center were all in California, including San Francisco Zen Center at Page Street, Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, and Green Gulch Farm Zen Center at Sausalito. She studied Zen in the three major monasteries of the Center and was lay-ordained in 1979. “Lay-ordained” means that, often when an American Soto Zen practitioner has received adequate Zen training, a ceremony will be held to grant him or her formal status and he or she will take a vow to keep precepts.¹ In 1982 she left

the Zen Center and became lay again. In the past decade, in the summer when the Mountain Center opened to the public, she was invited to hold workshops to teach creative writing and to give dharma talks.

In those years, she sat in meditation for three to five sessions every day. The training was apparently vigorous and she practiced arduously. Even after leaving the monasteries, she has been doing "lay person's practice," doing meditation almost daily. About meditation, she explained: "You have to be very concentrated and your posture matters. Such as your breathing matters and your awareness needs to be both focused and wide, both pointed and soft" (Hirshfield Interview 2005). Since *zazen* (pronounced *zuochan* in Chinese) [meditation in sitting posture] has been the main focus of the Japanese Soto Sect, it is only natural that this practice exerts a tremendous impact on Hirshfield's thoughts and writing. The Japanese Soto Sect originated in a sect in Tang Dynasty (A.D. 618-907) China, called Caodong (pronounced as Soto in Japanese) Sect. The Sect was revitalized in the Song Dynasty (A.D. 960-1279). Its master, Zheng Jue (1091-1157), promoted *mezhaohan* [the Zen method of sitting in meditation and doing mirroring introspection]. Later, another master, Ru Jing (1163-1228), emphasized *zhiguan dazuo* (pronounced as *shikantaza* in Japanese), which literally means "One should do nothing but sitting in meditation." It can be said that the method of *zhiguan dazuo* was a reaction against the prevailing Zen practices of the Linji (pronounced as Rinzai in Japanese) Sect in Song Dynasty China, which emphasized the study of *gongan* (pronounced as *koan* in Japanese). The young Japanese monk Eihei Dogen (1200-1253) came to China to study Zen and received dharma transmission from Master Ru Jing. Master Ru Jing once said that to study Zen is a kind of *shenxin tuoluo* [peeling off the body and mind] and that there was no need to burn incense, to prostrate, no need to chant Buddha's name, to do penitence, to read sutra, and one would gain awareness just by *zhiguan dazuo* (*shikantaza*) (Shuiyuezhai Zhuren 527). Eight hundred years after Dogen founded the Soto Sect in Japan, it was transmitted from Japan to California by a Japanese Zen master, Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971), who was the

founder of the San Francisco Zen Center system. After Master Shunryu Suzuki passed away, his dharma heir Richard Baker, an American, became the new abbot, and Master Baker was the teacher of Hirshfield. Therefore, Hirshfield was not merely learning Zen from Baker, but also from the writings and practice of a long Soto tradition that can be traced to Song Dynasty China.

In the thirteenth century Master Dogen wrote a short treatise on *zazen*, called “Zazen-gi” [Rules for *Zazen*]. It has provided the rules followed by monks and nuns in the Japanese Soto Sect ever since. In this treatise, *zazen* itself is the most important of all Buddhist practices, for Dogen explains that *zazen* “is the dharma gate of great ease and joy. It is undefiled practice-enlightenment,” and he thus instructed his students, “engage yourself in *zazen* as though saving your head from fire” (Tanahashi 29-30). In these passages, Dogen elaborates on his Chinese teacher Master Ru Jing’s metaphor for sitting in meditation,—“peeling off the body and mind,”—by expressing that one should set “aside all involvements and let the myriad things rest.” Furthermore, Dogen emphasizes that any “conscious endeavor” is illusory: “*Zazen* is not thinking of good, nor thinking of bad. It is not conscious endeavor. It is not introspection” (Tanahashi 29).

From the teachings of Dogen and Shunryu Suzuki and from her years of *zazen* experience, Hirshfield learned the ways to reach profound awareness. When I interviewed her in 2005, she described what had been her experience of *shikantaza*, and described it by using the metaphor of a bird’s song and that of a cloud floating over a lake. To my question “What happens if some thought enters your mind?” she replied:

Not so different than if a bird’s song enters your mind. And continuing to receive. I am speaking of course an ideal. In a not so good meditation period, maybe I sit there and think. That’s not meditation, that’s just thinking. But if you are in *shikantaza*, and do *shikantaza*, a thought comes, it’s just like any other phenomenon. The ideal would be the image of a lake and a cloud that goes through the sky. The lake does not grasp the cloud and it does not accept the reflection on its surface. If there is a cloud, there is a cloud. The lake does not care. The lake is just being a lake. (Hirshfield Interview 2005)

Dogen says: "How do you think non-thinking? Nonthinking. This is the art of *zazen*" (Tanahashi 30). Hirshfield learned from Dogen's teaching of "nonthinking," for she believes that, while one is in meditation, "just thinking" is "not meditation." The impact of Shunryu Suzuki, Hirshfield's grand teacher, can also be seen in her response to my question. Shunryu Suzuki states: "When you are practicing *zazen*, do not try to stop your thinking. Let it stop itself. If something comes to your mind, let it come in, and let it go out" (Suzuki 34). In the interview passage, Hirshfield's metaphor of the lake could refer to the mind, and the cloud and bird's song could be analogous to thoughts that enter the mind. Hirshfield adopts Dogen's teaching that *zazen* should not be a "conscious endeavor," for she expressed that the mind should neither "grasp" a thought, nor should it bother to "accept" a thought. This training of refraining from conscious endeavor must have exerted an impact on her poetic voice in which any kind of reaction to the happenings in the objective world is curbed, and in which strong personal feelings and thoughts are restrained. All these devices of Soto meditation can help to reduce the meddling and interference of the mind; in other words, they can help to reduce the activities of one's subjectivity.

Samuel Maio categorizes the poetic voice in the period of Modernism into three modes: "the confessional, the persona, and the self-effacing" (Maio 4). Hirshfield's voice can be roughly grouped in the category, as a late comer, of the "self-effacing" mode. Maio defines this mode as the voice of the poet "engaged in self-examination: attempting to be impersonal while speaking of personal concerns" (Maio 180). He uses Mark Strand's poem "Giving Myself up" as an example: "I give up my eyes which are glass eggs. / I give up my tongue," and thinks that it is "incantatory" and can "simulate what might be an Eastern religious meditation of self-negation" (Maio 188). Strand's poem is apparently written in the "self-effacing" mode, for it attempts "to be impersonal while speaking of personal concerns," and his personal concerns are evidenced by the voice's repetition of its urge to renounce everything relating to the self. Compared to Strand's, Hirsh-

field's voice is just as impersonal in her attempt but speaks less of "personal concerns" and does not speak of "self-negation" at all. In other words, Hirshfield is more positive about her life and self than her predecessors writing in the "self-effacing" voice.

Take Hirshfield's poem "Floor" as an example: her voice is calm, objective, and observant; it can be described as "impersonal" as her concerns are not "personal" at all, for the content focuses on the nails in the floor as well as on human perception ("what we've declared the beautiful to be") and behavior ("pounded down" the nails) at large:

The nails, once inset, rise to the surface—
 or, more truly perhaps, over years
 the boards sink down to meet what holds them.
 Worn, yes, but not worn through:
 the visible work reveals itself in iron,
 to be pounded down again, for what we've declared
 the beautiful to be. (Hirshfield, *The October Palace* 32)

The impact of Zen meditation on Hirshfield's poetry is apparent in three aspects: the practice of the mind's concentration, the training of the mind in non-interfering, and the training of not sticking to personal, minute feelings, but expanding one's mind to become the "big self." To concentrate one's mind is the essential of all *zazen* experiences and has been emphasized by all sects of Zen Buddhism. However, each sect has its own method of meditative concentration. In the Soto Sect, to concentrate is to practice the mind power to restrain from interference. In other words, it is to learn the control that will free one from controlling. In the text of "The Clock" and "Floor" the pronoun "I" is not used, and the objects such as the pond ("its few leaves") and the nails ("the visible work reveals itself in iron") are given a certain degree of autonomy. This self-effacing way of presenting the objects could result from her practice of freeing herself from trying to take control. Furthermore, to concentrate is not just practiced during *zazen*, but in one's every act of daily life so that no matter how minute is the engagement, it should not be interfered with by other thoughts. Shunryu Suzuki thinks that to cook is also a practice of Zen, and he says,

"You should work on it with nothing in your mind, and without expecting anything. You should just cook! That is also an experience of our sincerity, a part of our practice" (Suzuki 53). Does Hirshfield, in her poems, write about the Zen experience of her daily chores? We may ask questions about the poem "Floor": whose home is this? Who is going to do the chore of pounding down the nails on the floor? It is very likely the home of the poet, and the poet herself is the one to do the chore. Therefore, the poem may actually be read as the poet's concentrated reflection on a minute chore in her own daily life. Hirshfield emphasised that one should concentrate on one's act, and one should be mindful of and remember the actual happening of the act at every moment. To her mind, there is "something already there, not to be worked towards, but to be remembered. That's close to the feeling. So to try to remember it in every moment in this daily life, in this human body, in this place on the planet" (Hirshfield Interview 2005). When she mentions "Beauty" and "griefs" in her poem "The Clock," these are precisely things in one's past "to be remembered." The poem could hence be seen as invoking and enacting those moments of the actual happenings.

Her poem "Floor" illustrates her mindfulness and her remembrance of the things in daily life, moment by moment. It must be due to her extreme mindfulness that the details of the worn floor and the protruding nails are noticed, and that the wear and tear of the boards by time is figured out. It is also due to the mindfulness to her own mind that she figures out layers of meaning behind these objects. Each crucial moment is attended to: the moment of finding out the correlation between the protruding nails and the boards, the moment of observing the floor's present condition ("Worn, yes, but not worn through") and the future moment in which the floor will be fixed and the nails will be "pounded down." We can see how thoroughly Hirshfield is concentrating on the objects normally ignored by people, and how she emphasizes the remembrance of, and the feeling for, minute things in daily life and in their momentary existence.

Because Hirshfield has undergone vigorous *shikantaza* meditation training, her mind is trained in non-interfering with her emerging thoughts and trained in refraining from making subjective judgment about them. She said in the 2005 interview that reaching this state of not grasping, nor accepting, is “an ideal.” Her poems show different stages of moving toward this ideal. Many poems clearly show a detachment and self-restraint, but some reveal just the opposite: they show the voice’s subjective judgment, such as in “In a Net of Blue and Gold”:

When the moored boat lifts, for its moment,
 out of the water like a small cloud—
 this is when I understand.
 It floats there, defying the stillness to break,
 its white hull doubled on the surface smooth as glass.
 A minor miracle, utterly purposeless.
 Even the bird on the bow-line takes it in stride,
 barely shifting his weight before resuming
 whatever musing it is birds do;
 and the fish continue their placid, midday
 truce with the world, suspended a few feet below.
 I catch their gleam, the jeweled, reflecting scales,
 small dragons guarding common enough treasure.
 And wonder how, bound to each other as we are
 in a net of blue and gold,
 we fail so often, in such ordinary ways. (Hirshfield, *Of Gravity* 3)

On the surface, “In a Net of Blue and Gold” describes a moored boat and several nearby living creatures. The boat, the bird, and the fish are presented by a rather calm, objective voice: “its white hull doubled on the surface smooth as glass,” “the bird on the bow-line takes it in stride,” and “the fish continue their placid, midday / truce with the world, suspended a few feet below.” However, the poet makes a subjective statement too readily for a *shikantaza* practitioner, because she comments on the boat with its reflection on the water as “a minor miracle, utterly purposeless.” This statement not only elevates an ordinary object to be something miraculous but employs the Taoist concept of extolling the purposeless and the useless state of a being or

an object. The miraculous "utterly purposeless" boat in her poem reminds one of the useless uncarved wood block in *Tao Te Ching*: "Though the uncarved block is small / No one in the world dare claim its allegiance" (Lau 49).

At the end of "In a Net of Blue and Gold," the voice speaks out loud its subjective judgment that all things are bound to each other and that people often fail to recognize the bond and fail to recognize its beauty, such as the blue color of sky, and the gold color of sunlight: "And wonder how, bound to each other as we are / In a net of blue and gold / We fail so often, in such ordinary ways" (Hirshfield, *Of Gravity* 3). In this poem, the boat, the bird, and the fish come and go, without being grasped by the mind, but the voice endeavors overtly in presenting its ideas. However, the voice tries to stay impersonal as much as possible, for in the ending lines the word "we" instead of "I" is used to deliver the observation on human behavior. The voice in "In a Net of Blue and Gold" can still, by and large, be categorized as that of the "self-effacing" mode.

In some of Hirshfield's poems, however, a passionate voice can be heard. Normally, one would not expect such a voice in the poetry of a versed Zen practitioner like her. One aim of *zazen* is to reach a calmness devoid of any strong feeling. Shunryu Suzuki says: "When you are doing *zazen*, you are within the complete calmness of your mind; you do not feel anything" (Suzuki 121). Is this passionate voice another voice of Hirshfield which is just the opposite of her calm, unobtrusive one? Does the passionate voice come from the sensitive, emotional poet in her? Hirshfield addresses this issue herself. She believes that passion and awakening can co-exist. She admires Japanese women poets such as Ono no Komachi (825-900): "Everything I learn from them is enormously hopeful. They of course are not only Buddhist poets, they are also poets of enormous power in the realm of eros [...] In this lineage, you didn't have to separate out the spiritual poet from the love poet, that the same lives could inhabit one woman [...] In the West they are very separated" (Hirshfield Interview 2001). I think as a poet striving to present feelings and emotions, Hirshfield has to solve

the paradox of being both calm and passionate in her life as well as in her writing. She thus describes an ideal Zen state in experiencing strong emotions: “If you can feel great joy without the desire to make that joy persist to the next moment; feel great grief without the desire to make anything different than it is. Then I think that joy and that grief are fully awakened. It’s only the clinging which is not awakened” (Hirshfield Interview 2001). Can Hirshfield’s poems reach a state of such equilibrium? Her poem “Percolation” will be used for discussing the problem of reconciling eros with an “awakened” state.

“Percolation” (Hirshfield, *The October Palace* 51) presents a raining scene in a voice imbued with feelings. A portion of the poem mainly presents images of living beings in the rain, such as the frogs, the cows, the crickets and the soaked plants. Hirshfield foregrounds the sounds made by the creatures, that the frog “rasps out of himself / the tuneless anthem of Frog”; that the cows “can’t get their chanting in time”; and that the crickets seem “to welcome the early-come twilight, / come in—of all orchestras.” Then the poem focuses on how the rain soaks the roots of plants and eventually turns itself into energy and returns to the elements: the rain water “rising through cell-strands of xylem, leaflet and lung-flower, / back into air.” At the same time, an emotional voice resounds throughout the poem. The rain is welcomed by all creatures, and the voice speaks emphatically: “surely all Being at bottom is happy.” The voice also instills strong emotion to all beings presented in the poem, that “the frog [...] is happy”; that the cows “are raising a huddling protest”; that the songs of the crickets are “most plaintive.” In addition, the image of the plants soaked in rain is intertwined with that of love-making:

yield to their percolation, blushing, completely seduced,
 assenting as they give in to the downrushing water,
 the murmur of falling, the fluvial, purling wash
 of all the ways matter loves matter.
 riding its gravity down, into the body (Hirshfield, *The OctoberPalace* 51)

The erotic metaphor, the strong feelings of the beings, and the brokenness of the syntax as if the speaker were short of breath, all contribute to the passionate tone of the voice. Does this poem demonstrate what Hirshfield believes to be the "awakened" state: "if you can feel great joy without the desire to make that joy persist to the next moment"? The emotional intensity of the voice is too impelling to be halted presently. It seems that in "Percolation" the emotional part of the poet gains an upper hand.

How is Hirshfield's passionate voice compared to that of Modernist poets? The first category of Samuel Maio's three modes of voice is the "confessional." Maio selects the poetry of Robert Lowell, James Wright and Anne Sexton to represent this mode (Maio 30-102). The voice in the verse of Confessional Poets is in most cases passionate, but the passion is always related to the speaker as well as to the pain and self-hatred from which the speaker suffers; for example, in Anne Sexton's "The Truth the Dead Know," supposedly a dirge written for her parents, the agitated voice focuses on expressing her own feelings rather than on the remembrance of her parents:

Gone, I say and walk from church,
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.
It is June. I am tired of being brave. (Sexton 43)

Though the voice in Hirshfield's "Percolation" is passionate, the passion is generated from the speaker's empathy for the feelings of the living beings and for the growth of the plants. The focus of Hirshfield's voice is different from Sexton's in that the former reveals a merging of the self into others while the latter is all wrapped up in one's self.

On the other hand, the voice in some of Hirshfield's poems expresses to the full a restraint and non-stickiness such as in "Secretive Heart" (Hirshfield, *Lives* 9) and "The Kingdom" (Hirshfield, *The October Palace* 3). In "Secretive Heart" the speaker visits a museum; she sees an ancient Chinese cauldron which could be an iron cooking

vessel. There are three characters in the poem, the heart of the speaker, the cauldron, and the perceiving mind of the speaker that appear as "I." In Soto Zen, emotions are considered obstacles in one's pursuit of enlightenment because Dogen thinks that a true Zen teacher "is not concerned with self-views, and does not stagnate in emotional feelings" (Tanahashi 36). In Hirshfield's poems, there are emotion and passion, but they are less personal and more involved in an act of empathy with the object. In "Secretive Heart," the heart immerses itself in the feelings for the cauldron while the perceiving mind is very curious about the heart's feelings:

Heart falters, stops
before a Chinese cauldron
still good for boiling water.

It is one of a dozen or more,
it is merely iron,
it is merely old,
there is much else to see.

The few raised marks
on its belly
are useful to almost no one.

Heart looks at it a long time
What do you see? I ask again,
but it does not answer. (Hirshfield, *Lives* 9)

In the poem, "I," the perceiving mind, is observing the reaction of the heart toward the object, the cauldron, and the mind does perceive in a restrained, non-sticky, non-attaching way. There is a similarity between the triangle of the mind, the heart and the object in the poem and that in the *shikantaza* experience as perceived by Hirshfield. Normally a meditation is an intact one (the mind) to one (the object) experience of concentration, in which the mind focuses on one thing. However, *shikantaza* involves three instead of two parties: the self that is observing, the object (cloud) and the self that is reacting to the object (lake). Since the poem "Secretive Heart" contains a triangle similar to

that of *shikantaza* experience, and since Hirshfield admits the enormous impact of Zen on her poetry, I will venture to compare the poem with the meditative experience.

Throughout the poem it is the heart that performs: the heart "falters," "stops" and then feels for the cauldron's material, age, and shape. So, the heart performs without any interference by the mind. Finally, when the mind asks "what do you see?", the heart does not even bother to answer. It just continues to feel and experience. This poem coincides with the way of *shikantaza* meditation, not only because there is the triangle, but because both the heart and the mind are autonomous, rational and intact. Hirshfield deftly reveals the secret of the enigmatic heart in the subtitle in order to retain the meditative mood of the verse itself. The subtitle is written by Yehuda Amichai: "What's this? This is an old toolshed. / No, this is a great past love." The subtitle hints at the cauldron, like the toolshed, being also "a great past love." It explains why in feeling for the cauldron, the heart "falters," because it must have perceived that the cauldron, hundreds of years ago, could have been a vessel used in daily life by an arduous cook or by a woman wholeheartedly working for her family.

In Hirshfield's poem "The Kingdom," the pattern of the triangle appears again: the self that is perceiving and observing, the object, and the heart that is reacting to the object. It is likely that Hirshfield is so much influenced by *shikantaza* experience that she adopts its basic triangle role pattern in her poetry:

At times
 the heart
 stands back
 and looks at the body,
 looks at the mind,
 as a lion
 quietly looks
 at the not-quite-itself,
 not-quite-another,
 moving of shadows and grass. (Hirshfield, *The October Palace* 3)

We recall that, in the 2005 interview, Hirshfield said that in *shikantaza* the mind (lake) should not grasp the thought (cloud), nor should it accept the thought. In "The Kingdom" the role play actually changes: the heart (the lion) becomes analogous to the lake while the mind and the body (the future lion) are analogous to the cloud. The third party is the observer, the speaker of the poem. The lion is looking at "the not-quite-itself" and "not-quite-another," which should refer to the lion's envisioning of its future motions when it hunts in the grass. Then in the latter part of the poem, the feelings of the heart enter into the arena of vision: "enter hunger, enter sorrow, / enters finally losing it all." Throughout the poem, the heart is in self-restraint, and it just watches quietly the future movements of her own body, watches the thoughts generating in her mind, and even watches its own strong feelings without any attachment. The self-restraint of the heart is just like someone being immersed in *shikantaza* meditation, immovably letting thoughts and feelings come and go, mirroring them without any interference. The voice in "The Kingdom" is not "self-effacing" in a negative sense like that of Mark Strand, for it is temperate and composed. Though the voice can take control over the self, it is not domineering, nor obtrusive. The self in "The Kingdom" and in "Secretive Heart" is divided, but there is no tension between the parts at all, and instead they are independent as well as collaborative. Samuel Maio's second category of voice mode is the persona. The persona can be best exemplified by the character Henry in John Berryman's poems. Unlike the collaboration and independence among the parts of self in Hirshfield's poems, both Henry and "I" in Berryman's are psychopathic. Maio says that Henry "was an outlet for Berryman, one that allowed him to say anything, express any emotion in his poetry and label it a poetic device" (Maio 116). I think Henry is violent, frenzied and schizophrenic while "I" is on the verge of becoming someone like him. Hirshfield's parts are just the opposite: rational, composed, and capable of maintaining equilibrium.

In the 2005 interview, Hirshfield also talked about how one should try to attain the "big self." I think by "big self" she means that in

meditation one's mind should contain as many beings and objects of the external world as possible. One's "small self" is "very sticky" in everyday life while the "big self" is not, for the small self is only "working towards ego purpose," and one should learn to be "not sticky." By being "sticky," she probably means that people are usually obsessed with themselves, with their personal gain and loss and with their feelings. Therefore, while meditating, one cannot help being disturbed and bothered by trivial personal matters. These words from Dogen's "Actualize the Fundamental Point" were quoted by Hirshfield in the 2005 interview to explain her belief in the "big self": "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things" (cf. Tanahashi 70). It must be due to her belief in the "big self" that Hirshfield's poems do not address her personal matters, but focus on beings and things in the objective world, such as the frogs, the cows, the floor, the leaves on the pond, and a moored boat. These beings and things are the components of the "big self." Her idea of the "big self" echoes the "big mind" of her grand-teacher, Shunryu Suzuki: "Zen practice is to open up our small mind. So concentration is just an aid to help you realize 'big mind,' or the mind that is everything" (Suzuki 32).

One of Hirshfield's ideal spiritual states is the attainment of the "big self," and *shikantaza* meditation can facilitate this spiritual search. An earlier poem of hers written in the 1980s, "Evening, Late Fall" proves that she has attained this spiritual state by breaking through her stickiness to the "small self." The word "blame" in line one implies that the voice is about to blame others; in other words, the voice is about to commit itself to the activities of the "small self" before it realizes that one should blame oneself instead, because of one's private concern:

It is not this world, then, to blame, with its red
and blue stars, yellow pears, green apples
that carry a scent which can move you to tears.
The others are not unlike this—
the women stand over sinks with their sleeves pushed back,

thin oxen lean into their yokes,
 snow falls with impossible lightness in spring.
 How do we bear it, then, to guess sometimes
 as their lives across the dark?
 How they sing as they run cotton towels across porcelain plates?
 How they are innocent? (Hirshfield, *Of Gravity* 41)

In line one the voice starts to recognize the merits and the beauty of the world instead of blaming it. In addition to acknowledging the touching power of things beautiful, the voice further extends its love and care by means of empathy so that it can participate in the existence of toiling beings, such as the dish washers, and the working animals, like the “thin oxen” under the yoke, and can even participate in the existence of non-sentient objects, such as the fine snow in spring. This poem shows that the voice has transcended the gain and loss of the “small self” and attained the “big self” whose consciousness can contain almost all. In a sense, this spiritual state can also be described as “impersonal” and “self-effacing.”

Impersonality is an important concept in Modernist poetics. T. S. Eliot’s essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” emphasizes that a poet should be aware more of the collective literary traditions rather than his own emotion and personality: “What is to be insisted upon is that the poet must develop or procure the consciousness of the past [...]. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (Eliot 40). By “depersonalization” (40), Eliot means that the poet does not find “new emotions” (43), and “the mind of the mature poet differs from that of the immature one [...] by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations” (40-41). Furthermore, Samuel Maio thinks that “the theories of impersonality that were entrenched in the poetry of New Criticism, or most poetry of the 1940s and 1950s (Eliot and Auden were the reigning masters) [...] intentionally eschewed the personal self” (Maio 7). However, the concept of impersonality carries more complexity than what Maio says. Sharon Cameron claims that “personality and impersonality do not stand in a binary relation,” and she employs William Empson’s

monograph, *Asymmetry in Buddha's Faces*, as an example to illustrate how incongruent features like the personal and the impersonal (cf. Cameron ix) can be "reconciled in a human image" of Buddha (Cameron xviii); she explains:

Empson's capacity to anatomize countenances based on the human particular but simultaneously moving beyond its limits, marking a person's features so they are recognizable as discrete and also the point at which this recognizability is effaced—at once crystallizing individuality and the flow that undoes it—gives a face to the paradox [...]. (Cameron xvii)

The prominent Zen feature in Hirshfield's poetry is not an isolated case in American literary writing. There are other American writers who adopt Buddhist ideas and experiences into their writing. How do her Zen poems differ from those written by others? It was more than twenty years after Zen Buddhism was disseminated, in a scale larger than before, to the United States in the 1950s, that Hirshfield started to write poems which were imbued with Zen experiences. Michael Davidson points out that many writers of the Beat Generation have "active involvement in both Eastern and Western religious traditions," in particular in Buddhism, among them Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsburg, Jack Kerouac, Philip Whalen, etc. (Davidson 95-96). However, Hirshfield's poetry is different from that of her predecessors who also wrote about Buddhist experiences, including poets of the Beat Generation mentioned above and Zen practitioners in the 1970s such as Norman Fischer (*1946) and Dale Pendell (*1947). Compared with their poetry, Hirshfield's presents in more detail how the mind of a meditation practitioner is at work. The others put more emphasis on the contents of their *zazen* and enlightenment experience.

Gary Snyder's poetry is often about the awareness he obtained in his Zen practices. He received training in several Rinzai Sect temples in Japan which emphasized *koan* study. That is why his poetry has a flavour of *koan*. *Gongan* (*koan* in Japanese), in most cases, refers to a terse, riddle-like dialogue between an ancient Zen master and his student, or to a strange act of the Zen master. The dialogue and the act aim at breaking the student's limitation of thoughts or his adherence

to thoughts. The dialogues and episodes were later collected and became classics for students of Zen, in particular those of the Linji (Rinzai) Sect. Snyder's poem "Ripples on the Surface" seems to describe the contents of his enlightenment:

The vast wild
 the house, alone.
 The little house in the wild,
 the wild in the house.
 Both forgotten.
 No nature
 Both together, one big empty house. (Snyder 381)

This poem can be likened to a *koan* given by a Zen teacher for the student to meditate. Similarly, lines by Chinese poet Su Shi (1036-1101) and Master Dogen are quoted by Snyder in his poem "The Canyon Wren" to present a *koan*-like riddle in order "to break human obsession with the logicity of our cognition" (Chung 86). Some of Hirshfield's poems also have the riddle-like *koan* quality, but mostly they rationally present her meditating mind at work, and unobtrusively present her spiritual query or her contemplation on feelings.

In a similar way, the personal and the impersonal traits in Hirshfield's poetry blend into each other. Hirshfield's poetic voice is both personal and impersonal; impersonal in the sense that it always focuses on beings and objects other than the private self, and personal in the sense that the voice unveils the process of how the self actively reduces her attention to personal matters. There is often a smooth fusion of energy that flows between the self and others in Hirshfield's poetry.

Dale Pendell studied Rinzai Zen and has been a member of the Ring of Bone Zendo located in San Juan Ridge in northern California. His poems are also replete with *koan* elements; for example, "Mountain and Rivers" contains several quotations of Dogen which sound like *koan*. There is another a passage that sounds like *koan*, but apparently was made up by Pendell himself:

Long ago there was a buddha called the Shrugging Buddha. Bodhisattvas, monks, nuns, and laypersons would ask questions of great earnestness and profundity, and the Shrugging Buddha would just laugh and shrug his shoulders. One day they set a trap for him. He got caught.

What did he do then? (Johnson and Paulenich 204-206)

This *koan*-like verse echoes *yizhi chan* [the one-finger zen] *koan* of Master Chü-chih (ninth Century): "Whenever master Chü-chih was asked a question, he would simply hold up one finger. One time a visitor to the temple asked Chü-chih's attendant about his master's teachings. The boy also just held up one finger" (Heine 173). Both shrugging shoulders and holding up one finger are awakening devices used by the masters. However, neither Snyder nor Pendell present the mental process of *zazen* as Hirshfield does, even though they have done *zazen* regularly for decades.

On the other hand, Philip Whalen and Norman Fischer in some of their poems do present the mental process of meditation. Like Hirshfield, they are practitioners of the Soto Zen Sect and both are priest-ordained.² This means that they are formally acknowledged as Zen teachers in the San Francisco Zen Center system. Coincidentally, both of them, like Hirshfield, are students of Master Richard Baker. The poetry of Whalen and Fischer also shows elements of Soto Zen Buddhism. One of Whalen's epigram poems titled "Upon the Poet's Photograph" reads: "This printed face doesn't see / A curious looking in; / Big map of nothing" (Schelling 378). In this short poem, like Hirshfield, Whalen rationally divides the self into two parts: the perceiving mind of the poet that looks in curiously, and the mind of the printed face in the photo. The poem is about the spiritual search of the "poet" who is looking at his own photo, and the voice sounds impersonal and objective, but the end of the search reveals his "personal concern." Compared to Hirshfield's, Whalen's voice still adheres to the self, the "small self," for the speaker is so much obsessed with his search for "nothing"³ that the face becomes a "map of nothing." In Fischer's poem dated "Monday, 3 December" in a series of poems called *Success*, a spiritual search into one's own past is touchingly described:

Highly ornate statue of Monjushri
 With sweet painted face
 Graces my table courtesy of Jim Ryder
 Can't remember
 Past anymore what was
 The life that went before nor can
 See anywhere
 The lay of the land, fence rows
 Bordering fields or the main street
 Where I grew up
 All gone if even there
 I never saw it
 Don't want to get it back
 Just the wonder of the search
 Finding nothing, not myself nor anyone
 Not society, not history
 Not the sun in the sky (Schelling 80)

The lines are indeed about the process of one's spiritual search by means of renunciation. At the end of the poem, the voice is able to break through its adherence to the past, to the "wonder of the search," to the self and to society, and able to break through its adherence to the objective world, but the focus on the acts of tearing oneself off shows that the voice is deeply involved with the self, unable to sever itself from the attachment. It seems that the voice of Hirshfield so far is the only one among modern American poets capable of true detachment and unobtrusive self-restraint, and capable of gaining a power to embrace a great many others.

Hirshfield grew up in the era of Modernism, and her poetry shares several characteristics with Modernist poets. In many of her poems, the vivid images of the external world, of beings and objects, are prominent and crucial. The voice in her poems is mostly rational and almost impersonal. The selves in her poems are often split and divided. Furthermore, like many of her Modernist predecessors' her poetry has an obvious Asian Buddhist flavor. In spite of these Modernistic characteristics, her voice is distinct and unique in that it is unobtrusive and at the same time encompassing; impersonal and at the same time personal. The training in Soto Sect's *shikantaza* meditation,

to a great extent, enables her to examine herself objectively and to expand her consciousness to contain other beings and things. Due to the practice of restraining the urge to interfere with her own thoughts, she is able to present her thoughts indirectly in a contemplative voice. Because of her spiritual search for the "big self," she is able to expand the consciousness to contain the external world with love and care. Her cultivation of the mind in the Soto tradition should be regarded as the major contributing factor to the forming of her poetic voice, unique among American poets, a new poetic voice imbued with profound Zen religious experience.

Hong Kong Baptist University

NOTES

¹A more advanced status is "priest-ordained": it will grant the person the status of Zen teacher.

²In 1991, Whalen became the abbot at the Hartford Street Zen Center in San Francisco. Fischer served as the director of Green Gulch Farm Zen Center in 1980, and from 1995-2000 he was the abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center.

³In Buddhism "nothing" refers to Śūnyatā (Sanskrit), which means "voidness." Yet Śūnyatā is not empty, being empty also of the concept of emptiness. To the extent that it is negative, its positive aspect is Tathātā, the suchness or "isness" of each thing.

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