

Modernist Elements in Jane Hirshfield's Voice and Zen Meditation: A Letter in Response to Ling Chung*

JANE HIRSHFIELD

Dear Ling Chung,

I am deeply moved by the profound attentiveness you have brought to my poems' words, and to my practice understanding, in your essay.

There will always be one or two things a person notices, but I will say something about only one, because I think it may be useful to you in the future—it concerns something I saw in the footnotes. While it is perfectly understandable to see priest ordination as more “advanced” than lay ordination, and that would be the regular view by many, for me it has always been very important to see lay practice as an equally valid way to practice Zen. Linji's/Rinzai's “person of no rank” is one teaching that points toward this (though it is of course about “no-rank” at a much more profound level). Layman P'ang and his daughter are also an embodiment. Richard Baker-roshi once described the traditional possible paths of Zen practice as four-fold: monk practice (which, unlike in Catholicism, need not be life-long, but is most often a period of intensive training, and I consider it one of the great blessings of my life that as a lay person, and as a woman, I came to Zen in a time and place where full monastic practice was available for me to do); priest practice (which I do entirely respect—and might have undertaken myself, under other circumstances); layperson's practice (which to some extent my own practice must be described as,

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since it is generally known now that I am a person who has trained in Zen), and “teahouse practice.” Teahouse practice means something like the practice of the old lady who runs the teahouse by the side of the road that people like to go to without knowing why—she just greets them in a way where they feel her attention, she sets the teacup down with mindfulness that can’t even be recognized as mindfulness. The teahouse isn’t labelled, Zen Teahouse. It is a kind of invisible practice, that does not look special, or “different,” and anyone who goes there feels comfortable. They don’t have to learn a special vocabulary, whether of Buddhism or of tea ceremony, to drink their tea, and leave feeling nourished and sustained.

It is probably obvious to you already that I love this “hidden practice” possibility. For a time when I was a young poet, no one knew about my background in Zen, and then I was truly doing teahouse practice. But people found out—when I was asked in a nationally televised interview about my “teahouse practice” I laughed, and said to the interviewer, “You’ve just burned down the teahouse!” But what I can still hope for my poems is that they are doing teahouse practice. You have already described it, in your essay, when you comment on the way that other poets who practice Zen often write more explicitly than I do about that as an experience, where my poems most often simply try to look from inside the eyes of practice. I was quite touched that you saw that about my work.

I don’t think of any of this as “better” or “worse.” It’s just my way, who I am in this body and mind and life. Nor is any of this actually willed or purposeful. It’s hard to write about these things without making them sound more intentional than they are. But an apple tree doesn’t “intend” to make apples. It just does. And last, of course, a person inhabits the world in many ways over a lifetime—you note this also already in your essay. I am not trying as a poet to be consistent, I am just a person who practices Zen, and one poem will have one relationship to practice understanding, another poem will have another. I make no claim to writing from a place of lasting Big Self, or big mind. Each poem reflects only the person I am at the mo-

ment of its writing. That you find, over time, a person whose poems reflect the mind of shikantaza, brings me gladness.

All warmest,

Jane

Thank you—

Jane

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