

Satori Kitty Roshi Style
(Or, Enlightenment Practices For Stones)

A Commentary on Philip Whalen's "Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz Mumonkan xxix"

Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz.
Mumonkan xxix.

Of

Course I could go to sleep right here
With all the lights on & the radio going

(April is behind the refrigerator)

Far from the wicked city
Far from the virtuous town
I met my fragile Kitty
In her greeny silken gown

fairly near the summit of Nanga Parbat & back again, the wind
flapping the prayer-flags

"IT IS THE WIND MOVING."

"IT IS THE FLAG MOVING."

Hypnotized by the windshield swipes, Mr. Harold Wood:
"Back & forth; back & forth."

We walked beside the moony lake
Eating dried apricots
Lemons bananas & bright wedding cake
& benefits forgot

"IT IS THE MIND MOVING."

& now I'm in my bed alone
Wide awake as any stone

Commentary: Background On Buddhist Teaching of Koans

Whalen's poem references a collection of Rinzai koans: Mumonkan, compiled by the monk Wu-men. Koans are cases for study, public records, much like law books. Zen humor in koans is somewhat unique in religious texts. Often koans may seem to contain "a pointless joke or silly question" as Whalen writes elsewhere (Whalen, *Overtime*, 32). While Zen humor is one possible koan texture, normally koans occur as a debate on Zen principles or as a story of a particular revelatory event. Both humorous and deliberate koans achieve aspects of satori and/or penetrating Buddhahood.

Mumonkan translates literally as "No Gate Barrier" or more colloquially as "The Gateless Gate", a blockade with no openings for passing through. The definition by Wu-men states there are endless paths to this state, however. Later, I shall discuss how Whalen's poem acts as another path to the Mumonkan 29th koan.

Rinzai Zen masters give koans to students as a required part of their training from the start. (Soto training uses them, but differently). The Rinzai student then takes a dokusan (face to face meeting) with the master and presents an understanding of a koan. The student usually tries for a long time to provide the Master with something that will embody the koan. John Daido Looi defines koan work: "We do koans. We don't talk about them." (Looi, *Two Arrows Meeting Mid-air*, xii)

While I believe that Whalen's poem functions as a path to this koan, in my opinion the poem also acts in the manner of a Zen student before his teacher. The poem presents and simultaneously embodies Satori and/or Buddhahood. Whalen does the koan. Whalen's poem shows remarkably varied verbal textures, events and storylines. However, no matter how many different types of activity occur, it is useful to remember the Soto priest Dogen's remark that "no mental activity has self." (Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 162)

Roshi Robert Aitken states that koans are not tricks but "the clearest possible expressions of perennial facts which students grasp with focused meditation and guidance." (Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier*, xiii) That guidance itself may seem like a gateless wall, something impassable as stone. This perception is not uncommon in other Asian disciplines.

When I studied Chinese philosophy with Dr. Vincent K. Shih, he practiced the Chinese method of teaching. The only encouragement was discouragement. The student must demonstrate or do the spirit of the teachings, not just its facts or principles. No one in that class ever managed this. Dr. Shih modeled that embodiment over and over for us, via startling unforgettable transformations from professor to fierce unyielding Master. Those riveting moments are still instructing me now.

Some of my Tai Chi Chuan trainers used that method, too: you have to be relaxation. Once, when I was away for several months from my teacher, I worked incessantly on embodying our meditation practices in my Tai Chi form. When I returned, during our first Push Hands (the Tai Chi martial arts) I "tagged" my teacher and pushed him out of the circle. No student had ever done this. Amazed and startled, he looked down: "Your feet are grounded!"

Then he said, "Now," and waved me back to push hands again. To demonstrate what else I might work on, he threw me out of my shoes.

I flew backwards and landed five feet behind my own shoes.

"But I was relaxed, grounded!"

“You could look at it that way.” He pointed out that, though my waist was open and relaxed and my feet grounded, there was “still tension in your right elbow!”

It was remarkably humbling to walk to my empty shoes and put them back on. The tactile memory of my feet leaving my warm shoes, the sudden cool air on my soles, as I was airborne, stays with me to this day.

A new path opened to my next obstacle and gave me a visceral vision of what more there was to work on. I am still working on this lesson.

Koan study has sequenced levels of gradations for particular aspects of enlightenment and this reveals that instruction never ends. (Loori, xxvi-xxi) There’s always a Master saying “Now,” with a comma after it, to show your practice needs more refinement. And even refined practice still remains with spiritual or physical stonewalls. My presentation of Whalen’s process hopes to show how that situation obtains in his poem.

The Text

Whalen uses certain parts of events set forth in the Mumonkan Case 29.

Two monks argued about the temple flag waving in the wind. One said, “The flag moves.” The other said, “The wind moves.” Their argument went back and forth and no one could agree.

The Sixth Ancestor (Hui-neng) said, “Gentleman! It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is your mind that moves.” The two monks were awe-struck. (Aitken, 184)

Whalen’s Demonstration

Whalen starts by dealing with insomnia, but his title claims this condition is a metaphysical one. Consider for a moment that this insomnia might be enlightenment. Your mind becomes so awake you cannot find sleep anymore. That’s a payoff. Or, conversely, your mind bubbles up so much chatter that both sleep and satori are impossible. That’s a danger, because if this chatter is taken seriously, it’s good to recall again Dogen’s assertion that no mental activity has self.

Whalen’s mind moves through the unlikely possibility of sleep with the radio and lights on. In a parenthetical comment he remarks on April’s whereabouts. So, either April a person or April a spring month or April a month on a calendar or April a warm spring day a change from winter “is behind the refrigerator.” So any of his Aprils—all species of rejuvenation—are hidden behind an obstacle.

These blockages for change engage Whalen for a moment, and then he writes a ballad stanza, about a woman “fragile Kitty”.

Far from the wicked city
Far from the virtuous town
I met my fragile Kitty
In her greeny silken gown

fairly near the summit of Nanga Parbat & back again, the wind
flapping the prayer-flags

At the time of this poem's composition, 1958, a popular TV Western called Gunsmoke featured a Sheriff who used to hang out in a saloon with a red-haired madam called Kitty, who wore green silk gowns. So this might allude to her, or perhaps Whalen's referencing Mae West, who often played tough madams with ambiguous names and only feigned fragility. I've yet to discover if this song is Whalen's invention or someone else's ditty.

The ballad's imperfect metrics, slightly off-center diction, and mechanical rhymes sounds like an American folk song from the pioneer era, akin to "Sweet Betsy from Pike".¹ In any case, our narrator Whalen is sleepless and perhaps lovelorn.

The faux ballad morphs into a faux travelogue voiceover. Perhaps imagining a religious pilgrimage, Whalen's mind removes these lovers' Western wedding off to Tibet, and at the summit of a mountain pass Whalen imagines a string of brightly colored prayer-flags getting a celebratory workout from the wind.

He quotes Mumonkan's 29th koan, but only the two monks' argument, but uses capital letters, that somehow make the argument seem louder.

"IT IS THE WIND MOVING."

"IT IS THE FLAG MOVING."

What follows is a classic Buster Keaton slapstick moment that translates this Buddhist argument into an incident with someone named Harold Wood, who was hypnotized by the motion of windshield wipers in the same manner as the two monks got transfixed by those flag flaps. But Whalen adds a characteristic elegant touch to his comic metaphor when we realize that this back and forth movement from flag to flap, from ballad to pilgrimage to koan, may be a contrapuntal device, embodying these contrary situations.

Our legendary couple, Miss Kitty and groom, continue their wedding:

We walked beside the moony lake
Eating dried apricots
Lemons bananas & bright wedding cake
& benefits forgot

In a galumphing parody of their nuptials Whalen's faux folk ballad runs amok and, in its third line, crash-lands into a splendid metrical pratfall about different delicacies. These ramshackle comical meters then feed into its ending line, about memory loss interfering with the complete catalogue of the wedding goodies. His last line scans as iambically perfect but also reads as poetically deadly dull, so that his ending mimes a middle-class, one cliché fits all, quality. This "& benefits forgot" line radiates a matrimonial posh lust--an indispensable Russian word that Vladimir Nabokov lovingly defines as "obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive." Whalen's use of this is Zen humor at its best.

Then Hui-neng's answer cuts through the two monks' Dharma knot, again in capital letters, to cap the argument.

"IT IS THE MIND MOVING."

Traditionally in Zen koan study, the priestly compiler/scribe comments on the koan also with short capping verses. Following that tradition, Whalen finishes his poem with an all-purpose couplet (which, by metrical inference, also ends simultaneously the ballad of fragile Kitty and her gourmand groom).

& now I'm in my bed alone
Wide awake as any stone

Parsing Whalen's Demonstration

In literary matters we may always ask the regular questions of a reviewer: What was the writer trying to do? Did the writer do it? And was it worth doing?

Read aloud this poem has a pleasant and at times rollicking rhythm to it, with elastic (or purposefully awkward) meters and rhymes. Is this simply a lyrical aid to memory (or a poetic mobile) that Whalen assembled to commemorate his monumental case of insomnia one April night in 1958? Or just a five-finger exercise to see if he could arrange some contrapuntal kitsch to the koan? What was our writer trying to do? We must go back to the original koan commentary and get to the heart of Whalen's knot.

Wu-men, the compiler of Mumonkan, comments on the three monks' koan with a poem:

Wind, flag, mind move—
all the same fallacy:
only knowing how to open their mouths;
not knowing they had fallen into chatter.
(Aitken, 185)

Wu-men's encouragement is discouragement: the classic counterpoint of Zen comments. He dismisses all three actors of this koan and labels all of their responses as trivial.² The key here is the concept of chatter, of idle inconsequential contradictory thoughts.

Whalen is acutely aware of the moves that his mind makes: his description for highgrade writing is: "a graph of the mind moving." (Whalen, 50)

With a Heisenbergian élan, Whalen's graph of the mind moving alters the subjects and/or objects even as their perceivers, objects and subjects interact, disappear and/or reappear; even as the graph/poem alters, diminishes or boosts the energy in each minute particular moment. Elements of this poem—ballads, travelogues, and koans--get hidden and reappear, so his consciousness functions as a rotating Calder mobile. Or perhaps a Zen garden where you never see all the rocks at once from any one point of view. His task was first to graph the trail that the insomnia left but while his entire poem concurrently also enacts (is) the koan's message. His poem demonstrates how enlightenment occurs by its process--not lifted out of its circumstances--but with all its trimmings. I'd argue that Whalen did do what he set out to do, as evidenced by his title: *Metaphysical Insomnia Jazz Mumonkan xxix*. In the manner of a Zen student before a teacher he has improvised takes and riffs on a koan that end in a satori.

So what is this message? Between our ignorance and being truly awake in Buddha-mind lives our "subconscious gossip": that never-ending blather of our brains, but also the high whine melodies of our nervous system and the bass beat of our blood. The capping poem of Wu-men—its gist—provides a matrix for the dialectic of Whalen's poem.

At the end our poet is left "awake" but with all the sentience of a stone: even the subconscious chatter and body's nerve harmonies and blood beat metrics fall silent.

The flapping of the prayer-flags represents Buddha-mind equal to the galumphing clunky lyrics about fragile Kitty equal to the reduction of consciousness to the glacially slow mineral and chemical exchanges of stone. One result of doing a koan may be achieving a geomantic sentience of a stone Buddha.

Because, as Veronica Stapleton wrote, “Whalen’s understanding likens a human to a stone, suggesting that the process of enlightenment can unfold as slowly as the sentience of a stone would allow.”
(*Stapleton, Email to author, 2006*)

So was this worth the effort?

The Further Refinement

Koans often engage an evaporation and/or valorization of will. Whose or what will power remains a big question. Even if these equalizations are so, and judged valid, entertaining and/or engrossing, does there still remain a choice: which condition/path holds our best route for enlightenment, the preferred gate, if you will, for entering Buddha-mind?

One answer is: go forth and meditate on insomnia, Kitty, fruits, moony lakes, marriage, windshield wipers, koans, prayer flags or stones.

How do we discriminate between our passions for fragile Kitty, for delicious fruits, for studying Dharma exchanges inside koans, for visions of some prayers for all sentient beings fluttering up on a mountain pass and for our present sentience as mineral and chemical bundles?

Who do you love? Who do the job better? Choices, chatter, choices.

With Whalen’s Zen humor, being wide awake (enlightened) is here presented as small beer, because that moment may shine forth like a gem trapped in a reduced rocky moment of awareness due to sleeplessness, and this or that moment’s status depends on whether the self or no-self or mu-shin engages, enacts or embodies that moment. To use a touch of Dogen’s logic: on this path more refinement is not not our body, mind, joy, pain, chatter.

Dogen defines the act of discrimination/refinement inside enlightenment: “every time you reach today, then you can go on thus. This then is the body-mind of Buddhas and Zen masters, because you can go on thus.” (Cleary, *Rational Zen*, 51)

But we may still ask: did Mr. Whalen achieve Buddha-mind in these lines of his graph?

What would Kitty Roshi say?

“Sleep on it. Then come up and see me sometime.”

Works Cited:

- Eihei Dogen. *Moon in a Dewdrop*, translated by Kaz Tanahashi. Northpoint, 1985.
Eihei Dogen. *Rational Zen*, translated by Thomas Cleary. Shambhala, 1992.
John Daido Loori. *Two Arrows Meeting Mid-air*. Tuttle, 1994.
A.L. Price & Wong Mou-lan. *The Diamond Sutra and The Sutra of Hui-Neng*. Shambhala, 1969.

Rothenberg & Winston, *Continuous Flame, A Tribute to Philip Whalen*. Fish Drum, 2004.
Veronica Stapleton. Email to author, December 22, 2006.
Philip Whalen. *Overtime: Selected Poems*. Penguin, 1999.
Wu-Men Kuan. *The Gateless Barrier*. Translated by Robert Aitken. Northpoint, 1991.

Footnotes:

1. In *Continuous Flame* Whalen's sister Velna related to interviewer Michael Rothenberg that a teenage Whalen played popular songs on the piano for his parents to sing along. Apparently he also improvised lyrics to popular songs, too, as seems to be the case here.
2. With Zen humor and outrageous insouciance Wu-men dismisses the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng, a notably illuminated and unyielding priest, and the author of *The Platform Sutra*. In the latter work Hui-neng states that "The process of 'becoming and cessation' is everlasting" while noting that Nirvana lacks this quality, being continually present. So he may be said to anticipate the point of Wu-men's poem.