

“The Only Chance to Love This World”: Buddhist Mindfulness in Mary Oliver’s Poetry

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Summary

The article examines selected poems by Mary Oliver from a Buddhist reader’s perspective, with a particular focus on Buddhist mindfulness (*smṛti* in Sanskrit and *sati* in Pali). Her personal style and use of various poetic devices enable the Buddhist reader to uncover mindfulness in her poetry. Since articles are, by their very nature, limited in scope, I will examine only the following three corollaries of mindfulness in Oliver’s poetry: 1) Beginner’s Mind (called *shoshin* in Zen Buddhism), 2) Mindful Awareness, and 3) Nowness which constitutes being fully present in the here-and-now. These three corollaries are by no means exhaustive. Mindfulness constitutes a broad theme within Buddhism, and different corollaries may be emphasised by the various Buddhist traditions, schools and sects. I utilise these particular corollaries of mindfulness because they are especially pertinent to her poetry. Furthermore, I will illustrate how they inform Oliver’s amazement at, and love relationship with, the natural world, which constitute major topoi in Oliver’s work. In addition, I will be discussing these under separate headings to aid the understanding of how each particularly functions within her poetry. However, although these are discussed in more isolation than usual, these corollaries are not mutually exclusive, but interrelated constituents of mindfulness.

Opsomming

Die artikel ondersoek geselekteerde gedigte van Mary Oliver vanuit ’n Boeddhistiese lesersperspektief, met spesifieke verwysing na Boeddhistiese aandagtigheid (*smṛti* in Sanskrit en *sati* in Pali). Haar persoonlike styl en aanwending van verskeie poëtiese strategieë stel die Boeddhistiese leser in staat om aandagtigheid (“mindfulness”) in haar poësie bloot te lê. Vanweë die beperkte aard van die meeste artikels, sal ek slegs die volgende uitvloeisels van aandagtigheid in Mary Oliver se digkuns bespreek: 1) “Beginner’s Mind” (wat as *shoshin* in die Zen Boeddhisme bekend staan), 2) Aandagtige Opmerkzaamheid, en 3) Teenwoordigheid (“Nowness”) wat totale aanwesigheid in die oomblik behels. Aandagtigheid se drie uitvloeisels put egter geensins die moontlikhede uit nie. Aandagtigheid vorm ’n breë tema binne die Boeddhisme en ander Boeddhistiese tradisies, skole, en sektes mag ander uitvloeisels benadruk. Ek beklemtoon hierdie drie uitvloeisels van aandagtigheid, omdat hulle besonder relevant vir Oliver se poësie is. Vervolgens toon ek aan hoe hierdie uitvloeisels Oliver se verwondering oor, asook haar liefdesverhouding

met die natuur, wat hooftopoi van haar digkuns is, uitbeeld. Verder sal ek elke uitvloeisel afsonderlik bespreek ten einde insig te bied in hoe elkeen binne haar digkuns fungeer. Alhoewel hierdie uitvloeiels betreklik in isolasie bespreek word, moet hulle nie as afsonderlike begrippe verstaan word nie, maar eerder as sterk samehangende natuurlike uitvloeiels van aandagtigheid.

Introduction

In broad terms, the subject of this article, which brings together ancient Buddhist teachings and contemporary American poetry, seems more than apposite to the theme of “Worlds in dialogue”. Not only does the article concern itself with a dialogue between East and West but also, more particularly, with mindfulness and Mary Oliver’s poetry. Further, and more specifically, the article seems appropriate because almost all Mary Oliver’s poetry presents readers with intimate and detailed accounts of her ongoing dialogue with the natural world in its myriad facets and moods. In her critical writing, which I only touch on here, the poet assumes an explicit conversation between the poems and her readers.

Mindfulness has become a term used increasingly by both the scientific community and the self-help publishing industry. A plethora of scientific articles explore the effect of mindfulness, especially through sitting meditation, postulating outcomes such as a reduction in psychopathologies in research subjects by measuring neurological activity and the likes (Austin 1999; Kabat-Zinn 1996; Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society). Although this type of research may be useful for the advancement of science, it is concerned mostly with *outcomes* rather than with *explaining* and *teaching* mindfulness. Furthermore, the environment in which subjects are tested is usually artificial, which is ironic because mindfulness is usually a practice that constitutes everyday life and activities. On the more popular side, authors such as Eckhard Tolle (2008, 2011) and Deepak Chopra (1989, 2010) do render mindfulness more accessible to readers but do not always explain its Eastern origins explicitly because their target market is mostly Western readers who, in many instances, are from religions that do not necessarily condone Eastern influences. In these cases, the original meaning of mindfulness is somewhat obscured because the emphasis falls rather on other positive psychology concepts. Mindfulness is not always called mindfulness either. Of course, one could argue that even an obscured understanding of mindfulness is better than none, and is a start in its understanding. Nonetheless, I undertake to lift the veil of obscurity that exists about mindfulness by placing it in its Eastern (in this case, Buddhist) context. Because of the constraints of an article, I will be unable to refer to, or discuss, mindfulness’s pre-Buddhist Indian yogic origins.

In the Buddhist context, Right Mindfulness constitutes the seventh limb of the Noble Eightfold Path and is therefore one of Buddhism’s central

practices. (For the reader unfamiliar with this Path, consulting Nairn (2002), and Brazier (2001) will be of great assistance.) David Brazier (2001: 164), founder of Western Pureland Buddhism, aptly summarises mindfulness when he writes: “To be mindful is to keep in mind”. Inherent in the terms *mindfulness* and *to keep in mind* is *mind*, which is the bedrock of Buddhist philosophy and practice. In the *Dhammapada*, which constitutes a central Buddhist scripture, the opening line of Verse 1 explains the central importance of *mind* most succinctly: “Everything proceeds from mind” (The Mother 2004: 3). This assertion comprises the underlying notion that Buddhist practice entails the conscious studying and observing of one’s mind.

In the Eastern philosophical sense, *mind* is more inclusive than its usage and associations in a traditional Western sense; the East (traditionally referring to India, China, and Japan) does not regard the intellect as *mind’s* only component, but rather more holistically; this is especially true of Zen Buddhism: “Zen has as its basic assumptions a world of wholeness that is obscured with illusion as a result of dualistic thinking” (Milstead 1998: 5-6). This particular non-dualistic premise is evident in the fact that mindfulness is not just an intellectual exercise when studying the mind but also entails mindfulness practice that the practitioner *experiences*. At the same time, mindfulness comprises more than just a spiritual exercise and experience but becomes essential on the level of the practitioner’s everyday life: “Practicing mindfulness in Buddhism means to perform consciously all activities, including everyday, automatic activities such as breathing, walking, etc., and to assume the attitude of ‘pure observation’, through which clear knowledge, i.e., clearly conscious thinking and acting, is attained” (Shambhala 1991: 145).

As can be seen from this description, mindfulness cannot be separated from the word “consciousness”, which comprises a spirit of mindful awareness. A further definition of mindfulness in the Zen context is posited by Alan Watts: “The aim of Zen is to bring about a transformation of consciousness, and to awaken us from the dream world of our endless thoughts so that we can experience life as it is in the present moment” (2000: ix). Important here is that a practitioner cannot experience mindfulness when focused in the past or future; it is only the present moment that contains the essence of mindfulness.

Therefore, mindfulness is a transformative experience because awareness of the moment brings about a conscious awakening of the mind. This waking-up experience is crucial in Buddhism; the root “budh” means to wake up; therefore the word “Buddha” means “Awakened One”. It is important to remember, therefore, that, in the context of Buddhism, it is not just the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, who underwent a transformation of consciousness that led to *nirvana* but that everyone has the inherent capacity for waking up.

1 Beginner's Mind (Shoshin)

Watch, now, how I start the day
in happiness, in kindness.
(Oliver 2005a: 71)

In order to awaken to the present moment, one has to cultivate a Beginner's Mind, which the Japanese refer to as *shoshin*. Shunryu Suzuki describes Beginner's Mind as being

[t]he innocence of the first inquiry – just asking what you are – is BEGINNER'S MIND. The mind of the beginner is needed throughout Zen practice. It is the open mind, the attitude that includes both doubt and possibility, the ability to see things fresh and new. It is needed in all aspects of life. Beginner's mind is the practice of Zen mind.

(Suzuki 1971: 13-14)

It is this innocence of Beginner's Mind that Mary Oliver employs in her poetry but which may be read as naiveté by the uninformed reader (of both Oliver's poetry and of Beginner's Mind): "Oliver's craft is deceptively simple – an emotional intensity that speaks clearly and directly to the reader. More appropriately, James Dickey characterises it as remarkable, creating richly complex poetry without throwing complexities in the way of the reader" (Alford 1988: 283). Beginner's Mind is further evident in the specific style Oliver utilises to engage readers in her poems by having a fresh perspective on the world she observes: "Oliver does not rely on an esoteric language or a private set of symbols. Her language is not arcane; her meanings are not hidden" (Thurston 1999: 30).

In addition, Oliver believes that the role of contemporary poetry, which naturally includes her own, differs a great deal from stylised, formalised metrical poetry which stresses formal tone and formal structures. According to Oliver, poetry has become more like conversational speech, which, when read, "would feel spontaneous, as true to the moment, as talk in the street, or talk between friends" (1994a: 70). This particular style dovetails in with the idea of "[t]his [Zen], an ancient way of teaching, using the simplest language and situations of everyday life. This means the student should teach himself" (Suzuki 1971: 14). The language of Zen (and, by implication, Buddhism) is therefore vital to Oliver's stance about using simple language in order for readers to become participants in the poem. Moreover, the idea of participation further connects with one of Buddhism's key tenets: "The purpose of studying Buddhism is not to study Buddhism, but to study ourselves" (Suzuki 1971: 76).

In "When Death Comes", lines 20 to 27 articulate the spirit of Beginner's Mind.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
If I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

(Oliver 1992: 10)

First, the topos of amazement is directly stated in line 21, and is linked with the ability of Beginner's Mind to be that “kind of mind that's not already made up. The mind that's just investigating, open to whatever occurs, curious. Seeking, but not with expectation or grasping” (Hartman 2001). Furthermore, amazement is reinforced by the metaphor of the “bride married” to it. Significant here is the image of a bride. Supposedly, a bride is on the threshold of her marriage, a newly married woman for whom married life is in the “honeymoon phase”. Therefore, she is essentially a beginner, a novice in the union of marriage. Who is this “bride” wedded to in this poem? Amazement. Therefore, the honeymoon phase for this bride is perpetual – lasting “all my life” – “just as Beginner's Mind always retains an element of that which is innocent of preconceptions and expectations, judgements and prejudices” (Hartman 2001). Linking here with the bride image is: “In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few” (Suzuki 1971: 21). A bride still perceives the marriage as having many possibilities whereas a married woman of a few years has usually become “an expert”, probably realising that certain marital patterns and interpersonal relationships will not change or materialise.

Oliver takes the idea of marriage a step further in line 22: by linking line 21 with line 22, she in fact weds the female and male aspects of this union, bringing balance to this “marriage” by giving both aspects equal resonance. The bridegroom is married to “the world” and here Oliver fulfils a prevalent theme in her poetry: “how to love this world”. Examples of poems in which this theme predominates are “The Lover of Earth Cannot Help Herself” (2004b: 17) and “To Begin With, the Sweet Grass” in which the last line reads: “Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world” (2009: 39), with the pinnacle reached in “October”: “Look, I want to love this world / as though it's the last chance I'm ever going to get / to be alive / and know it” (1992: 61).

However, despite Oliver's explicit love of the world, the possibility exists for the Western reader to identify a certain paradoxical juxtapositioning of images in “bride, married to amazement” since “bride” seems to be a concrete image or metaphor where amazement is inclined more towards ab-

straction. To the Buddhist reader, these images would not be paradoxical since abstract and concrete are merely concepts or perceptions held by the individual and which, ultimately, may differ from person to person. Similarly, Oliver has the same propensity toward the interweaving of concrete and abstract images within her poetry, something that has been noted by Burton-Christie. He explains this predilection in terms of adequation and correspondence. The critic, Sherman Paul, whose terms these are, sees “adequation as describing carefully, letting things be in their concrete particularity, refraining from the temptation to symbolize. It is a literary equivalent that ‘respects the thing and lets it stand forth ... an activity in words that is literally comparable to the thing itself’” (Burton-Christie 1996: 79). Correspondence, on the other hand, amounts to “the search for symbolic meaning, the process of making imaginative connections between the ever-shifting and fathomless worlds of self and nature” (1996: 79).

Burton-Christie takes the position that Oliver has the ability to utilise both terms seamlessly in her poems: “These two apparently divergent impulses, one antisymbolic, the other symbolic, ebb back and forth in the poetry of Mary Oliver. Her ability to integrate them without confusing them yields an original vision of spirit and nature” (1996: 79). However, Oliver also marries two seemingly abstract ideas, death and amazement, in “When Death Comes”, which emphasises the Buddhist undercurrent present in her work: impermanence (death) and Beginner’s Mind (amazement) which are two sides of one coin for the Buddhist practitioner.

Moreover, Beginner’s Mind is taken a step further by describing the “suchness” or “thisness” which translates in the particular aspects of the poetic observer’s “life”, in the phrase “something particular and real”. This “realness” is the “suchness” of something that is experienced through its emptiness, a term that may be misunderstood by the Western reader as nihilistic, akin to non-existence. However, simplistically put, emptiness is “openness, not negation. An object is Empty in that it has no self-identity beyond the sensory and phenomenal dimension” (Milstead 1998: 26). In addition, “When Emptiness is realized, the Zen concept of suchness is also uncovered. To perceive an object as empty is to see it in its suchness” (Milstead 1998: 26). In terms of Oliver’s poem, the words “particular” and “real” get new meaning in terms of Buddhist thought because the suchness of life is implicit: “Suchness may also be described as ‘as-it-isness’. The as-it-isness of the world is Zen reality” (Milstead 1998: 29). It is exactly this reality of the poetic observer’s life that is imbued by amazement and which amounts to mindfulness: “Mindfulness is knowledge or wisdom that pulls the whole mind and heart of the knower toward a connection with the way things are in all their exciting particularity” (Goodenough & Woodruff 2001: 586).

The last line, “I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world”, resonates strongly with the poet’s view of approaching every moment with

Beginner’s Mind. Looking at the preceding lines – “I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened, / or full of argument” – has a particular autobiographical element: “This I have always known – that if I did not live my life immersed in the one activity which suits me, and which also, to tell the truth, keeps me utterly happy and intrigued, I would come someday to bitter and mortal regret” (Oliver 1994a: 119). This activity is not just writing or being in nature – the two passions of her life, but life itself. This is corroborated by Judy Orloff (2004: 208): “I’ve watched my friend, poet Mary Oliver, treat going to the supermarket as a holy rite. Every Cape Cod morning, snowy or warm, she shows up at the A&P just as it opens, ecstatic to get her food for the day. Mary approaches her poetry with the same inspiration” (Orloff 2004: 208).

This is the reason why Oliver does not only tell about being mindful but she shows it directly and, moreover, *becomes* mindfulness: “The mindful person, Buddhism tells us, assumes the attitude of pure observation, freed from all false views, and apprehends a reality that is not only objective but also becomes subjective. The mindful person really sees” (Goodenough & Woodruff 2001: 586).

2 Awakening through Mindful Awareness

How well do you look and see the things of this world?
(Mary Oliver 1994b: 121)

It is with the innocence of first inquiry of Beginner’s Mind that Oliver approaches mindful awareness: In the poem “Sometimes” (2008: 37), Oliver offers what she calls “Instructions for living a life”. Once again, her conviction is that life is to be lived intensely; we are not here merely to exist or survive.

Pay attention,
Be astonished,
Tell about it.

Once more, Oliver’s accessible style may be misconstrued as functioning on a merely discursive level because these three lines seem like ordinary instructions to the reader. Syntactically, they may indeed be, but, semantically, they rest in intensity. However, Oliver’s use of adequation breaks down the boundaries between the poet/reader that may sometimes exist because of symbols obscuring the essence of a poem, rendering it difficult for the reader to access through the use of correspondence. McEntyre claims that “it is the function of poets to restore to us the mystery of the ordinary” (1994: 7). As will be shown in the poem “Morning”, later in the article, Oliver is a poet who deals mainly with the ordinary, but it is exactly through

Buddhist simplicity that she invites readers to rethink their lives through the practice of mindfulness.

Oliver herself maintains that the role of the poet is to render “the poem clear and accessible” (1994a: 77). This view about accessibility and interaction between poet and reader, instead of creating distance through formal poetic devices, echoes Watt’s stance about the haiku: “A good *haiku* is a pebble thrown into the pool of the listener’s mind, evoking associations out of the richness of his own memory. It invites the listener to participate instead of leaving him dumb with admiration while the poet shows off” (1962: 202).

Oliver’s poems are “pebbles” tossed into the minds of her readers so as to engage all their senses. Mann (2004: 54) reiterates the connection with the sensual experience in Oliver’s poetry: “To recall a key theme – paying attention – one does not simply attend *mentally* to what one sees in nature; rather one must apprehend nature with all the senses”.

The three instructions of mindfulness found in “Sometimes” are reminiscent of Oliver’s poem “The Buddha’s Last Instruction” (2004a: 31). The word “instruction” is crucial to Buddhism because the Buddha *instructed* his followers; he did not *preach* to them or at them. Preaching is something that Oliver believes the poet should not indulge in: “The poem in which the reader does not feel himself or herself a participant is a lecture, listened to from an uncomfortable chair, in a stuffy room, inside a building. My poems have all been written – if not finished at least started – somewhere out-of-doors: in the fields, on the shore, under the sky. They are not lectures” (2004a: 64). Instruction also extends an invitation to readers to practise mindfulness.

This is indeed why the Buddha’s last instruction was to be “a lamp unto yourselves” or as articulated in “The Buddha’s Last Instruction”: “‘Make of yourself a Light,’ / said the Buddha” (Oliver 2004a: 31). This instruction advises the enquiring person not merely to adopt a belief system simply because they are told to do so but to investigate any belief system for themselves to verify its validity of its truthfulness for them. The Buddha maintained that even his own teachings were (and still are) not above scrutiny. This is manifest in a key Buddhist text called the *Kalama Sutta*, illustrating the Buddha’s proclivity for questioning and doubting all phenomena:

Now, look at you Kalamas, do not be led by reports, or tradition, or hearsay. Be not led by authority of religious texts, nor by mere logic or inference, nor by considering appearances, nor by the delight in speculative opinions, nor by seeming possibilities, nor by the idea: “this is our teacher”.

(Batchelor 1990: 8-9)

Oliver’s instructions may thus be seen as analogous to a Buddhist enquiry into reality, in much the same way as the Buddha had instructed his followers. Although not exclusively, his enquiring mind parallels the scien-

tific endeavour, which means that, in this part of the poem, Oliver starts with the observation process, keeping the metaphorical and symbolic parts for later:

She exercises the restraint of a good scientist observer, letting things be before making them *mean*. Metaphor must come second or it comes too cheap. Look first before you compare. Watch. Describe. Follow what you see through time. This is how to know. Comparison may serve, but it will not fully reveal what may only be comprehended in honouring the particularity of the unique creation.

(McEntyre 1994: 7; my italics)

Prothero reiterates this: “Mindfulness seems to be Oliver’s *métier*, looking and listening her scientific method and contemplative practice” (2008: 4). Other Oliver poems in which paying attention is featured explicitly is “Upstream” in which she asserts that “[a]ttention is the beginning of devotion” (2004c: 56) as well as in “Yes! No!” (1994b: 8): “To pay attention, this is our endless / and proper work”.

Oliver posits that the poet should see things in a “fresh, exciting, and valid way” by scrutinising “the world intensely, or anyway that part of the world he or she has taken for subject” (1994a: 99). Charlotte Joko Beck articulates the same imperative: “The key is attention, attention, attention” (Beck 1993).

Turning to the devices Oliver employs in “Sometimes”, the end-stopping of each line creates a pause, suggesting that readers should stop and contemplate the line’s meaning and implications before going on to the next one and the next instruction; the process emphasises mindful awareness through close attention. The last line, “Tell about it”, comprises two notions: writing about it, as Oliver has done, or having readers share their newfound mindfulness with others. In fact, she incorporates these three instructions into her own life on a daily basis, when engaged in her daily walk:

[I] look at things, and listen, and write down words in a small notebook. Later on, a long time later, a gathering of these words may become something I will think worth risking between the boards of another book, so you may know – if, as I hope, this one [*Blue Pastures*] has made you more curious about the wild world than you were previously.

(Oliver 1995: 120)

This is how Oliver starts a ripple effect by telling readers explicitly to pay more attention to their surroundings, and to change their lives. Mary Oliver herself asserts that “awareness and thought [are] two powerful agents of change” (Oliver quoted in Swann 2000: xiv).

Changing one’s life through mindful awareness is the thematic preoccupation of Oliver’s poem “Swan”. Because of the limited scope of this

article, the poem is not analysed in detail; only the poetic devices she employs to persuade her readers to be mindful are considered. “Swan”:

Did you see it, drifting all night on the black river?
 Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air,
 an armful of white blossoms,
 a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
 into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
 biting the air with its black beak?
 Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
 a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees,
 like a waterfall
 knifing down the black ledges?
 And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds –
 a white cross streaming across the sky, its feet
 like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light
 of the river?
 And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
 And did you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
 And have you changed your life?

(Oliver 2010: 15)

First, the poem is a notable example of Oliver’s counterbalancing adequation and correspondence. Her strategy of asking the readers pertinent questions to make them think about their own lives functions as the more concrete and, therefore, more direct part of the poem. Secondly, she sketches a sensual experience by recruiting the senses: “Did you see it”; “Did you hear it”, “And did you feel it”. Thirdly, the swan becomes emblematic of the inner transformation required to change one’s life through the poet’s use of metaphors that reinforce the sensual experience: “an armful of white blossoms”, “a perfect commotion of silk and linen”, “a snowbank, a bank of lilies”, and “a white cross”. Furthermore, Oliver’s application of similes captures the swan’s beauty: “a shrill dark music, like the rain pelting the trees / like a waterfall”, and “its feet / like black leaves, its wings like the stretching light / of the river”.

Ultimately, the tactile experience of feeling the swan – “did you feel it?” – at the denotative level is more than a sensory one, becoming, at the connotative level, a moment of awakening. In the Buddhist context, this awakening through mindfulness brings to bear transformation of the *minds* of readers, linking it directly to Oliver’s question in the last line: “And did you change your life?”. She enquires whether her readers took this opportunity to liberate themselves from their old patterns of thinking and perception. Readers now have the mindful capacity of awakening not only to the beauty of the swan but also to a fresh way of being, if they so choose. Oliver herself prizes “feeling” above most other outcomes of a poem; when asked in an interview whether there is something missing in the way students read

today, she answered, “Well, they read for content, not for the felt experience which is also in the writing. The question asked today is: What does it mean? Nobody says, ‘How does it feel?’” (Oliver in Swanson 1990: 5).

3 Being in the Present Moment/Nowness

What I want to say is
that the past is the past,
and the present is what your life is.
(Oliver 2008: 57)

The process of awakening through mindful awareness, especially through feeling, is feasible only when one is fully present in the here-and-now: “as long as people seek to awaken to themselves and to their life as it is – to the immediacy of this very moment – the spirit of Zen will appear” (Beck 1989: vii). Chögyam Trungpa refers to this experience of being in the present moment as *Nowness*: “The only answer is Nowness. *Now* is the important point. That *now* is a real *now*. If you are unable to experience *now*, then you are corrupted because you are looking for another *now*, which is impossible” (1988: 96). What Trungpa contends here is that the past and the future may be experienced as real but they are, in truth, no more than misperceptions generated by an unawakened mind. This is precisely what Judith Orloff, who quotes from Oliver’s “When Death Comes” as an epigraph, asserts under a heading, aptly called “Savor the Miracle of Small Moments”: “All we have is the moment” (2004: 207).

The notion that the present moment is all that really exists is apparent in Oliver’s poem, “One or Two Things” :

3
The god of dirt
came up to me many times and said
so many wise and delectable things, I lay
on the grass listening
to his dog voice,
crow voice,
frog voice; *now*,
he said, and *now*,

and never once mentioned *forever*.

4
which has nevertheless always been,
like a sharp hoof,
at the center of my mind.

(Oliver 1986: 50-51)

From the last stanza, it is clear that the poetic observer has been burdened by “*forever*”, the sense that she finds it difficult to be always in the moment. This is foregrounded by the simile, “like a sharp hoof”, creating an image of a painful burden, a hoof that keeps on kicking her. This image brings to mind the association with the devil’s cloven hoof, a more sinister delineation, which falls beyond the ambit of this article but which, nonetheless, remains an interesting image with many interpretative possibilities. But why is “forever” such a burden? Because it is akin to perpetuity, all future time, endless. When viewed from this angle, life becomes a mere abstraction. However, the god of dirt – which may refer to the many incarnations of nature: “dog voice”, “crow voice”, and “frog voice” – is drawing her attention to be mindful of the present moment through the repetition of the word “*now*” as well as its italicisation. The repetition of “*now*” may also be construed as an onomatopoeic evocation of the frog’s croak.

Notice the difference between the two stanzas: in the first, the poetic observer is communing with nature: “I lay / on the grass listening” as opposed to the “*forever*” that is at “the center of my mind”. In the first part, she is mindful, aware of her surroundings, just “listening”, whereas, in the last stanza, her mind seems closed-off, anxious, dangerous like a sharp hoof, preventing her being mindful of the moment. Suzuki reiterates the importance of being aware of one’s surroundings in the present moment: “When your life is always a part of your surroundings – in other words, when you are called back to yourself, in the present moment – then there is no problem” (1971: 82). What becomes problematic is that when one is not doing this, the mind becomes distracted and, most commonly, neurotic.

In *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, a typical *roshi* or Zen master is described: “The flow of his consciousness is not the fixed repetitive patterns of our usual self-centered consciousness, but rather arises spontaneously and naturally from the circumstances of the present” (Suzuki 1971: 18). The phrase, “center of my mind”, in the last line of Oliver’s poem, may be read as a repromulgation of Suzuki’s “self-centered consciousness”. This consciousness, the “sharp hoof” (Oliver) of the mind with its “fixed repetitive patterns” (Suzuki) matches the description of the Buddhist notion of the ego-mind. It is the habituated ego-mind that keeps the *mind* from being “mindful” and enjoying the now, perpetuating suffering like a prodding/kicking hoof: “self-estrangement and anxiety are inherent to the structure of the ego-self” (Milstead 1998: 31). It is this ego-mind that keeps the self locked up in abstractions instead of allowing it to live moment to moment: “Ironically, the consciousness of self that makes abstract thinking possible also perpetuates abstract thinking, keeping enlightened beings locked in a spiral of attachment and suffering” (Milstead 1998: 33-34).

Looking at the first stanza, the god of dirt becomes emblematic of Buddha nature: “But if you limit your activity to what you can do just now, in this moment, then you can express fully your true nature, which is the universal

Buddha nature” (Suzuki 1971: 75). Buddha nature also means “‘being Buddha’ or ‘being the boss’. Wherever you go you should be the master of your own surroundings. This means that you should not lose your way. So this is called Buddha because if you exist in this way always, you are Buddha himself” (Suzuki 1971: 132). The god of dirt, by implication, is a paradox just like the lotus flower, a predominant emblem in Buddhism; in order for it to grow and flourish, it needs mud; therefore the god of dirt may allude to the Buddha who is to be found in ordinary, even “dirty” things.

This allusion to the Buddha who is to be found in everyday things is exactly what it entails to be in the moment. The Western world tends to view the sacred and the profane as mutually exclusive; but, to the Eastern Mind, they are interrelated: “In the Western world we have become accustomed to thinking of spiritual concerns as being distinct from everyday life” (Watts 2000: xv). This disparity between the sacred and the profane is exactly what Oliver undercuts in her poetry by employing adequation and correspondence.

In the first nine lines of “Morning” (Oliver 2004a: 102), Oliver is using adequation mainly but, at the same time, her direct images create an intimate picture of everyday life: “Very likely the mood that develops between you and such poems is one of confidence, even intimacy” (Oliver 1994a: 77). Therefore, the language, tone, and style affect the mood or atmosphere of the poem, making it readily accessible to the reader. This is done through the meticulous attention to detail: “Attention is the luminous gift of Mary Oliver’s writing, poems with clarity of detail, memorable music, and deft linkage of human insight of the carefully observed world, which she praises and loves with wide open heart and eyes” (Lohmann 1997: 16).

Salt shining behind its glass cylinder.
Milk in a blue bowl. The yellow linoneum.
The cat stretching her black body from the pillow.
The way she makes her curvaceous response to the small, kind
gesture.
Then laps the bowl clean.
Then wants to go out into the world
where she leaps lightly and for no apparent reason across the lawn,
then sits, perfectly still, in the grass.

(Oliver 2004a: 102)

In this poem, the end-stopped lines call attention to each of the images in the kitchen, creating a pause for contemplation before progressing to the next image. Oliver employs this device specifically, together with other devices, with her reader-listeners in mind. She does this on the grounds of the visible responses her regular live poetry readings create in her audiences: “I do remember those ‘listeners’ when I write. So all that old stuff –

the various mechanics – still fascinates me thoroughly. How enjambed lines ‘feel’ to the listener, as compared with end-stopped lines” (Oliver in Swanson 1990: 6). Oliver’s assertion of how poetic devices influence the listener (and implied reader) becomes evident in the way she utilises these, especially enjambment, in “Morning”. There are only two examples of enjambed lines in the poem: Line 4 in which the cat responds to the milk put out for her and line 7 in which the change of milieu takes place; the cat makes the transition from the kitchen to the outside world, leaping; the enjambment visually calls to mind the leap from one line to the next without a pause. In both instances, the reader would also pay as much attention to the enjambed lines as they would to the end-stopped ones.

Oliver utilises *seemingly* ordinary objects to be found in most kitchens around the world, but, through careful emphasis, they become universal objects of mindfulness; most readers will be able to identify with these and therefore rethink their value because they are usually taken for granted. Furthermore, the positioning of each object in the beginning of each new sentence (especially in the first two lines) as well as capitalising the first letter of the first two images – salt and milk – elevates them. Also noteworthy is the use of the ordinary house cat of no exotic breed whose actions are marked by ordinariness: she stretches, she curves her back, laps up the milk in a bowl; she wants to go outside like most cats, then leaps, and sits still. The fact that she is “leaping for no apparent reason” is a very Buddhist concept; just *being* in the moment with no agenda: “To have some deep feeling about Buddhism is not the point; we just do what we should do, like eating supper and going to bed. This is Buddhism” (Suzuki 1971: 76). Other devices Oliver employs to focus the reader on the *Nowness* of their reading experience are *anaphora* (also one of Walt Whitman’s most commonly employed poetic strategies) as well as using the imperative. Examples of the first, *anaphora*, are evident in “Gratitude”:

What did you notice?
 What did you hear?
 What did you admire?
 What astonished you?
 What would you like to see again?
 ... so the gods shake us from our sleep.

(Oliver 2002: 40)

An apt illustration of her usage of the imperative may be seen in the opening lines of the fourth section of the poem “Her Grave, Again” :

Look, here is the head, the horn beak, the waffle of the tongue,
 Look, here is the narrow chute of the throat, color of sunrise ...
 Do you see it!

(Oliver 2002: 49)

Through the use of these devices, Oliver invites the reader to be more mindful, not of the past or future but of the present moment; ultimately, readers should think about their own lives: “the voice speaking in the poem should, or can, imaginatively, become the reader’s inner voice” (Oliver in Swanson 1990: 4). Therefore, readers should undertake inner investigation, right now: “The ground is ourselves; we’re here to study ourselves and to get to know ourselves now, not later” (Chödrön 2001: 3).

Conclusion

To conclude, Buddhist mindfulness is essentially an attitude (the willingness to wake up) coupled with a practice (being fully present in the moment and accepting the moment for what it is) and an experience (Beginner’s Mind). Mary Oliver’s poetry lends itself to mindfulness; her usage of simple, ordinary language, together with poetic devices such as adequation and correspondence, inform all three corollaries of mindfulness: Beginner’s Mind, Mindful Awareness, and Nowness, the ability to be fully present in the here-and-now. It is through these three corollaries that the topoi of amazement and loving this world are articulated. The essence of Oliver’s poetry is the feeling it evokes in readers, therefore making it a mindful experience which may be life-changing for them:

It could mean something.
It could mean everything.
It could be what Rilke meant, when he wrote:
You must change your life.

(Oliver 2008: 19)

And this is precisely what Oliver keeps in *mind* when she writes: “When I step onto a stage to read poems, the anticipation and even the hope of the audience is palpable. The people sitting quietly in the chairs – they have come not to rest, but to be awakened” (Oliver 2005b: n.p.).

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