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If 6 Was Nine: Zen and the Art of Guitar Burning

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By the time of The Woodstock Music & Art Fair of August 1969, many people who identified with the American counterculture were experimenting not only with hallucinogenic substances, but also with Zen Buddhism and other aspects of Asian culture they associated with expanding consciousness. Zen *kōans* such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” had also entered American popular culture and could be heard on such trendy television shows as *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*. As a part of the same trend that celebrated experimentation, creative artists developed 60s psychedelic music, the inheritors of which can be seen in trance and rave music today. Like the odd, almost Dada-like language of a Zen *kōan*, psychedelic lyrics were often surreal, capricious, and even esoteric. We find such whimsical, psychedelic-like lyrics in many Jimi Hendrix songs, for example, when he says, “I'm looking out my belly button window” or “Excuse me while I kiss the sky.”

This chapter looks at similarities between Jimi's lyrics, actions, and guitar riffs and those odd Zen stories known as *kōans*. No claim is being made about whether Hendrix was either enlightened or unenlightened according to Zen. Nor is it suggested that he was aware of similarities between his songs and Zen *kōans*, but only that they are Zen-like. Singer-songwriter Richie Havens, who opened the Woodstock festival, has commented that, “Woodstock was not about sex, drugs, and rock and roll. It was about spirituality, about love, about sharing, about helping each other, living in peace and harmony.” This is also what Zen claims to be about. Also comparable to the Cynics of ancient Greek philosophy, Zen and Hendrix songs sometimes reject social conventions to make their point. To explore the possible connections between Jimi Hendrix songs and *kōans*, we begin with just such a Zen story.

And your cat he attacked me from his pillbox ledge

Zen is a type of Buddhism that developed in East Asia. It generally rejects textual study in favor of meditation and direct experience of nature. Because of this focus, Zen teachers developed a number of methods for getting students out of the habit of trying to understand the world in terms of logical connections, perhaps like psychedelic music. One of these methods is the *kōan*, literally “public case”. A *kōan* is a statement provided by a teacher to put the student's meditative attainment on trial. *Kōans* emphasize non- conceptual insight and are used to provoke “great doubt” about rationality. The following Zen story illustrates this. If it sounds baffling, then the non-conceptual trigger may be working.

Zen Master Nansen heard two monks arguing over a cat in the temple courtyard. Each monk was saying, “This is *my* cat!” Nansen came out of his quarters, picked up the cat by the scruff of the neck with one hand and held a sword in the other. Poised in this way, he declared, “If either of you can say a word, you can save the cat.” Dumbfounded, neither spoke. Nansen summarily cut the cat in half, ending the debate. That evening, Nansen's top student, Joshu, returned to the monastery from begging for rice and asked the master what had happened during

the day. After Nansen recounted the story about the cat, Joshu stood up without a word, put his sandals on his head and walked out of the room. Master Nansen shook his head as he left and muttered to himself, “Too bad, *that* would have saved the cat.”

Zen is a Buddhist tradition that is transmitted from master to student outside of concerns with doctrinal arguments, but through direct experience. No argument could have saved the cat. Arguments discriminate between this and that, while Zen asks us to stop such internal and external dialogues and just experience life without adding or taking away from it. Later, when a student asked Joshu to explain, “What is the Buddha?” Joshu replied, “Go have tea.” Not understanding, the student asked Joshu to explain the complexities of Buddhist philosophy, the Dharma. Joshu responded, “Go have tea.” The persistent student then asked, “What is the Sangha (the community of Buddhists)?” Again Joshu answered, “Go have tea.” Joshu was not avoiding the questions but responding that direct experience is the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha: the Three Jewels of Buddhism. He may as well have said, “Go listen to a Jimi Hendrix lead.” Although I would, without doubt, be struck by the master’s stick of compassion to whack such discriminative explanations out of my head, I’ll take the risk of offering one more. Nansen’s sword cut through the delusion of separateness that the discriminative mind creates in order to make sense of the world, even if that cognitive reorganization is ultimately untrue and is the source of dissatisfaction and suffering. We say, “I like this and I hate that” or “This is my cat and it’s not yours” and by definition, this is dissatisfaction (*dukkha*), wanting something we don’t have and wanting to get rid of something we do have. The shock of a Buddhist master killing a cat knocks this discrimination out of us and in the moment between breaths, *we experience*. It is the same as if we had received a blow from the master’s staff or from Jimi’s axe of compassion. In experience free from discrimination, not only could six very well turn out to be nine but in fact, it has.

Now if six turned out to be nine, I don’t mind. I don’t mind.

Zen has a foundation story telling how it began as a tradition that does not rely on words or scriptures. The story says that the Buddha once took his disciples to a quiet place. As they had done many times, the Buddha’s followers sat in a small circle around him, and waited for the teaching. Such times were the occasions when he gave the lectures that were later recorded as the Buddhist sūtras, such as the famous *Lotus Sūtra* or the *Sūtra on the Foundations of Mindfulness*. But this time he said nothing. After a while, as the monks became puzzled, Buddha simply held up a lotus flower and remained silent.

The disciples only became more confused. At last, a follower named Kāśyapa or Mahākāśyapa (the Great Kāśyapa) suddenly understood and when he did, he smiled. In response, the Buddha declared, “I possess the true Dharma eye, the marvelous mind of Nirvana, the true form of the formless, the subtle Dharma Gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to you, Mahākāśyapa.” In this way, Kāśyapa became the second ancestor (after the Buddha himself) of the Zen tradition. Let’s think about what Jimi said in light of this. “Are you experienced? Have you ever been experienced? Well, I have.” But more important than either these words or the Buddha’s declaration is the Zen moment of pure involvement that comes before the words, in the flower of back-masked guitar

sounds, a reversing of what is expected like stringing a right-handed Strat left and the whole Jimi Hendrix Experience. This pure experience involves letting go of the dualistic construction of the world that we cling to so tightly. Then, “We’ll watch the sun rise from the bottom of the sea.”

The Flower Hidden in the Big Muff

Jimi Hendrix’s sounds and lyrics are a wealth of mad monk ecstatic wisdom pointing to expanded awareness beyond ordinary consciousness. But don’t concentrate too much on the pointing finger, you guitar players and philosophers, or you will end up imitating the style alone and lose the important Zen flower hidden within the flow of riffs. There was a Zen master who used to raise a finger when he made a significant point. A young follower started imitating the finger with nothing behind the words it punctuated. Observing this, one day when the boy raised his finger, the master cut it off with his sword. The boy ran off crying but later, when he started to imitate the master without thinking, there was no finger there, only emptiness, and the boy was greatly enlightened. How will you play the guitar with no fingers?

Zeami Motokiyo (c. 1363 – c. 1443) was the foremost writer and theorist of Japanese Noh drama. His plays and guidance in creating and performing Noh brought the art to its highest level of aesthetic achievement and appreciation. Zeami’s teachings centered on Zen, particularly the story of the flower the Buddha held. His strongest motivation in producing Noh plays was to enlighten his audience through theatrical production. He maintained that the audience should not know this was happening to them, that the actors had to keep that hidden. It was then the task of Noh performers to hold up a metaphorical flower to the audience through acting, and at the same time to keep this flower hidden, perhaps even from themselves as it was happening. According to Mahāyāna Buddhism in general, the larger Buddhist tradition of which Zen is a part, this is also the task of a Bodhisattva, to attract people to the path of awakening clandestinely. A Bodhisattva is an “awakening being,” a person who is not yet a Buddha but is both becoming awake (or enlightened) and is awakening others in the process. For Zeami, a performer has a particular set of tools or flowers for being a Bodhisattva. The flower Bodhisattva Jimi held up was his guitar, Marshall, effects, voice, or lyrics leading to the pure experience of the unity of these elements within our lives and the world. Zeami speaks of one’s flower as “essence,” an essence that is an ongoing crystallizing of experiencing. The flowering of one’s talent leads to an understanding of and direct experience of a Zen-like essence of the human and universal condition of sentient beings. What is experienced, according to Buddhism, is *tathāta*, typically translated as “suchness” or “thusness” in English, even if English doesn’t otherwise have these words. This means to experience life *thus*, just like it is, without internal dialogue narrating. It’s opening the experiential window to the wind and letting pure experience blow in. Zeami taught that in the hands of a Bodhisattva, this can be transmitted in a single gesture, a turn of the head or, we can suggest, the feedback from a JTM-45/100.

For Zeami, in this way, Zen performance involves a mystic transmission to the audience. This requires an intuitive understanding on the part of the performer. Zeami thought that there is a fundamental rhythm basic to Noh and he points out that this is the same rhythm that is present in all of nature. Countless Hendrix fans have found this rhythm. Buddhists and others have offered ideas about how rhythm and mantra affect our brainwaves and consciousness. One of the

major principles of the flower in performance is that, to a great artist, one of the reasons a flower is beautiful is that it sheds its petals and eventually dies. That a flower undergoes constant changes in front of the viewer, can be compared the progression of Hendrix's famous set on the Monday morning that closed Woodstock as well as the 60s. Zeami said, "If hidden, acting shows the Flower; if unhidden, it cannot." Such a performance is pulled off through skill-in-means (*upāya*), that is, the ability to use one's talents and instruments as a means of awakening the audience to pure experience beyond and within the words and sounds, and thereby transmit the experience of thusness. As Jimi says in "Are you Experienced", "If you can just get your mind together then come across to me."

If You Meet Jimi on the Road, Kill Him.

Zen art has a radical side, marked by extreme abbreviation, dynamic, and unconventional performance in painting and calligraphy. Chinese Zen (Chan) painters are famous for depicting images that might shock a person out of complacency and ordinary unenlightened thinking. The painter Liang Kai painted in a monochrome style like calligraphy. He painted Buddha suffering from the seasonal cold, emphasizing his humanity in keeping with the Zen understanding of an individual seeker of enlightenment. This approach of representing the historical Buddha, directly and probably shocking to his contemporaries, is related to Zen's idea of non-duality, in this case, asserting a paradoxical non-differentiation between the pre- and post-enlightenment view of the world. Zen painters used an outlandish style that was a pictorial metaphor for the irrational nature of sudden enlightenment. In many ways, Hendrix does the same thing, challenging the standing orthodox thinking about the war, America, and reality itself. "If the mountains fell in the sea, let it be, it ain't me," which can be a nice message also in the face of today's politics. The same Chan painter, Liang Kai, also painted a depiction of the famous Zen master Huineng ecstatically tearing up a Buddhist sūtra. Although this might not have been historically accurate, it does fit the Zen ideas of non-duality, of shocking you out of your belief system, and of destroying the icon that might actually stand in your way of direct experience, whether this is a religious scripture, an image of an alleged saint, or the conventions of pop music. It may be the same as the person who can say, "Well, I stand up next to a mountain, I chop it down with the edge of my hand." In Zen Buddhist tradition, when a new master succeeds the old, a robe or backrest is handed down symbolizing that the new master is fit to receive them, perhaps like stories of musicians giving their guitars to another, such as Johnny Cash to Bob Dylan. At the time when Chinese Master Linji was given the backrest by his master, Linji exclaimed, "Bring me some fire." This apparent disrespect for the iconic symbol of the Zen patriarchal lineage is perfectly in line with Zen ideals.

In doctrine- and veneration-based traditions of Buddhism, there is a long-accepted notion that we should always revere and preserve sūtras and images of the Buddha. However, in irreverent Zen fashion, Linji went as far as saying that burning a sūtra or a statue of Buddha could help us achieve enlightenment. From one perspective, this is like the Zen idea that we have to hit the bottom in order to rise. Once we sink, as Jimi says, "We'll watch the sun rise from the bottom of the sea." When an outraged student asked Linji what he meant by burning the sūtras or an image of Buddha, the Zen Master replied, "When you realize that causation is empty, mind is

empty, phenomena are empty, when your single thought is set to cut off, transcendent and you have nothing further to do, this is called ‘burning the sūtras and the Buddha’s image’.” The same destruction of the idols (or fingers) that, in our piousness, keeps us from the real experience that they should evoke, can be seen in Jimi’s act of lighting his guitar on fire. Likewise, Zen is known to employ violent images to shock students from complacent thoughts about the nature of reality, such as cutting the cat in half, which is, of course, a violation of the Buddhist precept prohibiting killing.

Master Linji said, “If you attain such insight, you will be free from the hindrances of such terms as ‘secular’ and ‘sacred’.” In a single thought, seeing an empty fist or a pointing finger, you mistake it for reality. You fabricate illusions within the six-senses field, and belittle yourself, saying, “I am a bumpkin, while he is a sage.” In the same vein, there is a well-known Zen *kōan* that says, “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” Again, I’ll risk receiving the feedback from the axe of compassion by venturing that this means we should get rid of the icons and symbols that we hold above us and thereby hold back ourselves.

Jimi Puts it All in His Shoe (and might even give a piece to you)

Jimi’s song “Instrumental Solo” or “Instrumental Improvisation” later called “Villanova Junction” exemplifies his Zen-like attainment and bodhisattva-like offering of this experience to the world. It is well known that people talk about “The Star Spangled Banner” at Woodstock as the culminating point of the 60s. But, soon after it, Hendrix takes it to a new level of...not necessarily consciousness but experience. This can be related to Buddha holding up the flower for Mahākāśyapa, experience outside of doctrine or words, outside the meaning conveyed through his psychedelic interpretation of “The Star Spangled Banner” or through “Purple Haze.” Hendrix says at the beginning of the set, “You can leave if you want to. You can leave or you can stay, we’re just jamming.” Most people had already left. At the beginning of the *Lotus Sūtra* too, many people in attendance leave before the Buddha speaks the highest Dharma. To this, similar to Hendrix’s remarks at the beginning of the set, the Buddha comments, “Now I am free from twigs and leaves and have nothing but all that are purely the true and real. It is good...and now I will expound the matter for you.”

It’s the final day of Woodstock and Jimi is about to close out the 60s and, according to some, address what Vietnam has done to America through the “Star Spangled Banner”. People cried. Many who were there said as the sun rose and Hendrix conveyed the sounds of bombs dropping superimposed on the national anthem, they knew something was happening in that moment and that the 60s were truly over. After the “Star Spangled Banner”, Hendrix transitioned seamlessly into “Purple Haze.” A few months later there was Altamont.

A survey of the readers of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* found that 83% of American Buddhist converts have tried psychedelic drugs. Many subsequent surveys asked non-Asian Buddhist if they have used psychedelic drugs. The results showed that anywhere between 62 to 80% of the respondents report that they have. Among them, about half said that they believed that Buddhism and psychoactive substances were compatible. Many said that they continue to use psychedelics for spiritual purposes. However, most said that they believed using

psychedelics is not the right path, but that they can provide a glimpse of the reality to which Buddhist practice points. In interviews done by Douglas Osto for his recent book *Altered States: Buddhism and Psychedelic Spirituality in America* (Columbia University Press, 2016) many American Buddhist practitioners referred to psychedelics as the gateway or substance that opened the door to Buddhism. Perhaps, in the same way, "Instrumental Solo" can lead us beyond our national "Purple Haze", as Jimi said, "Not necessarily stoned, but beautiful." If so, something remarkable really did happen at Woodstock to change the paradigm, even if, as Abbie Hoffman suggested, it was, to the contrary, appropriated by the media and misrepresented to the public to this day as a stoned-out party.

According to this interpretation, Hendrix used the song "Purple Haze" as an eschatological gateway leading away from death and destruction signified by "The Star Spangled Banner" and the age it represents, to a new Zen-like experiential beginning with his "Instrumental Solo". Thereby he takes us, in a sense, to "the land of the new rising sun", not Japan (the land of the rising sun) but one free of borders, internal, external, both, and neither. Even if the name "Villanova Junction" is not one that Hendrix gave the instrumental, it is perhaps accidentally appropriate in terms of Zen. Because, accordingly, the song is the junction to the new world just as the Latin origin of the word "Villanova" gives it the meaning of "new town." From a Zen perspective, in performing "Instrumental Solo" or "Instrumental Improvisation" at Woodstock, Hendrix proved he really was the Axis, just as he says in "Are you Experienced" when he stops talking and only plays, "Let me prove it to you." By using his Stratocaster axe as the Zen stick of compassion he serves as the axis of the world and universe, thus the double entendre (kind of) of "axis" and "axe-ist".

But how can we say if this is the case or not without, ourselves, discriminating between what is and what is not. About Jimi and Zen, we are like the man up a tree in the *kōan*. You're up a tree holding onto a branch by your teeth with your hands tied behind your back. Your feet can't reach the branch below. Someone comes along at the bottom of the tree and asks, "What is the meaning of Zen and who was Jimi Hendrix?" If you don't answer, you fail to help the person, who may continue to think Woodstock was about drugs, sex, and rock and roll. But if you do, you will have to let go of the branch and crash below. What do you do? Play the guitar with your teeth?