Seeing Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek Through Shunryn Suzuki’s Zen Mind

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Abstract

Zen is transmitted from Japan to the West and has taken root in America. Since Shunryn Suzuki, the Zen master who promoted Zen Buddhism in America, I will focus my discussion on the Zen ideas primarily based on his representative work—Zen and the Birds of Prey. Anyone who has read Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek will be impressed by her ability to observe nature. In the first chapter, Annie Dillard’s close-up view of the frog has a profound impact and is widely talked about. Remarkably, Shunryn Suzuki, who praises the frog’s posture and its sensitivity to nature in the same way as Dillard, is also taken aback by the frog. Like Dogen, a Soto Zen master, who said: ‘To learn Buddhism is to learn oneself, to learn oneself is to forget oneself, and to forget oneself is to be启发教化 by all things’.

Most of us fail to see the world around us, but people like Dillard and the Zen master Shunryn Suzuki, who have a profound nature. This paper argues that Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek shows how Dillard observed and observed nature, and she sought to present what she saw and experienced while exploring the Tinker Creek in Virginia’s Blue Ridge. The purpose of writing the experiences in the Tinker Creek is that, as she said, “I propose to keep here what Thoreau called ‘a meteorological journal of the mind,’ telling some tales and describing some of the sights of this rather tamed valley, and exploring, in fear and trembling, some of the unmapped dim reaches and unholy fastnesses to which those tales and sights so dizzyingly lead” (13). The Tinker Creek she explores is just the ordinary “neighborhood” (13), but Dillard

I. Seeing Through Zen

Don Scheese claims in her book Nature Writing "Investigating the nonhuman world is for Dillard a religious experience, a way to communicate with God” (120) and John Bottaglia in “Zen, Taoism, and American Nature Writing: Spiritualism and Philosophy in Works by Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, and Wendell Berry” also states “Dillard views nature as the vehicle through which she can understand the nature of god, the traditional Christian God” (98). Indeed, Dillard raises questions about the identity of God as well as the nature of the created universe after witnessing the frog being sucked by the giant water. For instance, “If the giant water bug was not made in jest, was it then made in earnest?” asked Dillard (9). Nevertheless, I think Dillard does not mean to answer any theological questions in this book, instead, she just wants to present what she sees and experiences while exploring the Tinker Creek in Virginia's Blue Ridge. The purpose of writing the experiences in the Tinker Creek is that, as she said, “I propose to keep here what Thoreau called ‘a meteorological journal of the mind,’ telling some tales and describing some of the sights of this rather tamed valley, and exploring, in fear and trembling, some of the unmapped dim reaches and unholy fastnesses to which those tales and sights so dizzyingly lead” (13). The Tinker Creek she explores is just the ordinary “neighborhood” (13), but Dillard

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thinks it's “an active mystery, fresh every minute” (4). It's a good place to stay and think. Therefore, she would like to regard herself as a hermitage and clamp a house to the side of Tinker Creek as an anchorhold to live in as well as to keep her “steadied in the currents, as a sea anchor does, facing the stream of light pouring down” (4). Because of the characteristic of being “fresh every minute”, the creek is no longer plain. In fact, it's a world filled with “stimulus and beauty” (5) and Dillard is very willing to take a good look at it. The point here is how Dillard sees the creek. As Dillard claims that she is “no scientist” (13), she doesn't want to explore the creek as a scientific professional. Instead, she proposes to discover the valley as an infant.

An infant who has just learned to hold his head up has a frank and forthright way of gazing about him in bewilderment. He hasn't the faintest clue where he is, and he aims to learn (14).

A newly-born infant has no idea about the world, but he is most ready to learn from whatever he sees. On the contrary, a knowledgeable adult may become too proud to learn anything, as Dillard elaborates:

In a couple of years, what he has learned instead is how to fake it: he'll have the cocksure air of a squatter who has come to feel he owns the place. Some unwonted, taught pride diverts us from our original intent, which is to explore the neighborhood, view the landscape, to discover at least where it is that we have been so startlingly set down, if we can't learn why (14).

What makes this pilgrim at Tinker Creek special is the “infant” way Dillard sees the world around her. Though Dillard is not a Buddhist, the way she sees the world indicates she aims to be as awakened as Buddha.

Buddha is the “Fully Awakened One” or the “Enlightened One”. Siddhartha Gautama, born to a royal family in the Himalayan foothills, is known as the Buddha of our time. After Siddhartha achieved the enlightened mind, he did not sit under the bodhi tree forever enjoying the enlightened mind. Instead, he moved on to speak of his experience in order to help people learn how to reach enlightenment. Therefore, from India the Buddha's teachings started to spread. Along with Buddha's students awoke to truth, Buddhism is carried to China, Japan, Tibet, Korea, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Indonesia. As each country added its own influences to Buddhism, there were three schools of Buddhism formed gradually. They were Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism and Vajrayana Buddhism. Of them, Mahayana Buddhism was considered a more liberal form of Buddhism. It emphasized intuition and meditation in practice. Zen Buddhism, in fact, was developed out of the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism. Zen first arrived in China from India through the Indian monk Bodhidharma. And during the end of the twelfth century, the Japanese monk Eisai and his student Dogen brought Zen to Japan from China. Though Eisai and Dogen belonged to two different schools of Zen, the Rinzai and the Soto school respectively, they both emphasized the importance of seated meditation. Zen thrived in Japan and later in the last years of the nineteenth century, it headed west to the United States, the melting pot of various religions. One of the most influential figures in American Zen is Shunryu Suzuki. His book, “Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind”, has a tremendous impact on Western Zen. And in 1962, he founded the San Francisco Zen center, which is famous for being one of the largest Buddhist communities outside of Asia. Though Dillard is not a Buddhist, as John Bottaglia states, “An examination of the Zen experience of
satori, or enlightenment, can help to interpret Dillard's vision, for it is an experience that closely resembles Dillard's” (129). I would like to discuss Dillard's pilgrim at Tinker Creek through Zen, based on Shunryu Suzuki's book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

**II. Seeing Duality and Oneness**

The structure of the book is, as Dillard states in “Afterward to the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition” of Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, divided into two parts: the previous part is mainly about the positive side of the world, while the later part, chapters after “The Flood”, is arranged to deal with the negative side of the universe. Indeed, Dillard describes many contradictory experiences of seeing both the beauty and the horror of the world. For instance, watching the frog being sucked by the giant water bug before her eyes is a “monstrous and terrifying thing” (8). What Dillard could do at that moment is nothing but “gaped bewildered, appalled” to see the frog dying:

And just as I look at him (the frog), he slowly crumpled and began to sag. His spirit vanished from his eyes as if snuffed. His skin emptied and drooped; his very skull seemed to collapse and settle like a kicked tent. He was shrinking before my eyes like a deflating football. I watched the taunt, glistening skin on his shoulders ruck, and rumple, and fall. Soon, part of his skin, formless as a pricked balloon, lay in floating folds like bring scum on top of the water (7-8).

This experience is so horrible that she couldn't catch her breath. However, she recognizes the beauty of the world, too. No matter what cruel experiences she has, there is “a thing as beauty, a grace wholly gratuitous” in the world that she can't deny (9). The example Dillard successively gives is the beauty of the mocking bird's “straight vertical descent from the roof gutter of a four-story building” (10). For her, the act is “as careless and spontaneous as the curl of a stem or the kindling of a star” (10). Though Dillard is shocked by the cruel scene of the frog's death, she admits the beauty of the world, just like the grace of the mocking bird's free fall, is always there for us as long as we are alive to it and able to sense it. Here, we can see Dillard's perception of the world is dualistic: the positive versus the negative.

Margaret Loewen Reimer claims, the tree of lights and the frog being sucked to death by the giant water bug are two “central visions” showing the contradiction between the beauty and the horror (185). Similarly, John Battaglia observes that Dillard “wrestles with the problem of apparent disunity” (103). The goodness of the world and the dark side of the nature are revealed throughout the pilgrim. Though Dillard endeavors to see deeply into everything around her, this dualistic viewpoint now and then confuses her. As the Zen master Suzuki states “Our usual understanding of life is dualistic: you and I, this and that, good and bad” (14). We are apt to see things in such a dualistic way because we tend to see with our head and become filled with thoughts. According to Suzuki, we have a small mind and a vast mind. He defines, “If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is a small mind, a limited mind” (22). With a limited mind, whatever we see or understand is presented in a dualistic way. The thoughts we think we have attained are self-centered and they cannot help us learn but limit our vast mind. Suzuki illustrates, “Good and bad are only in your mind. So we should not say, “This is good,” or “This is bad.” …. If you think, “This is bad,” it will create some confusion for you.”(15), in other words, if we try to discriminate what is good from what is bad or what is right from
what is wrong, we suffer from what we see.

Similar to Suzuki’s two kinds of mind, Scott Slovic says there are two different states of consciousness in Dillard’s mind while he tries to discuss Pilgrim at Tinker Creek through psychology. One is the “closed/ material”, and the other is the “open/ mystical” (78). In fact, Dillard herself introduces two ways of seeing in the second chapter “Seeing”. The first kind of seeing is “a matter of verbalization”, which is out of “a small mind” in Suzuki’s terms or “a close mind” in Slovic’s words. The second method of seeing is “a letting go” of verbalization, which I’d like to think as a result of “a vast mind” or “an open mind.” Seeing through verbalization, Dillard appears very active and busy: “Unless I call my attention to what passes before my eyes, I simply won't see it…...I have to say the words, describe what I'm seeing….I have to maintain in my head a running description of the present.” As Dillard states “When I see this way I analyze and pry,” seeing through verbalization not only takes much intellect to analyze and a lot of efforts to pry but may also cause Dillard in danger:

I hurl over logs and roll away stones; I study the bank a square foot at a time, probing and tilting my head. Some days when a mist covers the mountains, when the muskrats won't show and the microscope's mirror shatters, I want to climb up the blank blue dome as a man would storm the inside of a circus tent, wildly, dangling, and with a steel knife claw a rent in the top, peep, and if I must, fall (33).

From this, we know Dillard tries very hard to see. But why is Dillard willing to take the risk of her life just in hope that she can observe the nonhuman creatures around the valley as closely as she can? Dogen, a Japanese Zen master of the Soto school, to which Suzuki also belongs, once said:

To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self and to forget the self is to be enlightened by Ten Thousand Things.

To be aware of the world we are around is an essential way to reach enlightenment. We don’t know whether Dillard wants to be enlightened as Buddha, but we can be sure that Dillard is so eager to see as if she had never seen in her life. To take a good look at the world around her, in fact, is her primary objective in the pilgrim. “I’ve been thinking about seeing. There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises” (17). Dillard believes there is a lot of goodness, beauty, grace, and wonder in the world as well as there are many “pennies cast broadside from a generous hand” (17). The problem is if we can find the pennies and see them as wonders or surprises.

While Dillard puts many efforts in seeing, she discovers most of the time she sees through verbalization, which is mainly about analyzing and discriminating and inevitably leads to a world of duality and confusion. Fortunately, very soon Dillard finds when her seeing involves a letting go of verbalization, she can “sway transfixed and emptied” (33). The second way of seeing looks much more effortless and relaxing than the first one, but surprisingly, it is the seeing of “letting go” that makes Dillard “see truly” (34) and “an unscrupulous observer” (33). One example of this kind of seeing is the “new world” she finds when she recounts a summer evening during which she sits on a log bridge spanning Tinker Creek:

I saw the pale white circles roll up, roll up, like the world’s turning, mute and perfect, and I saw the linear flashes, gleaming silver, like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time. Something broke and something opened,
I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was the lip of a fountain the creek filled forever. I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh-flake, feather, bone (34).

Here what Dillard sees is a perfect world full of light and it’s a world that she won’t be able to see through the analyzing process.

Suzuki says “If you discriminate too much, you limit yourself” (2). Seeing through our heads doesn’t help us see truly, but creates some confusion for us. In Zen’s belief, our “original mind” includes everything within itself. According to Suzuki’s explanation, the original mind is “always rich and sufficient within itself.” We should not lose our self-sufficient state of mind. However, this is by no means a closed mind, but actually an empty and ready mind. “If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything.” says Suzuki.

But how can one have an empty or open mind? In “Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind” we see the point very clearly that “In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the experts’ mind there are few” (2). As I’ve mentioned earlier, Dillard suggests us to see like “an infant” (13). While she laments she can not see the light that comes from the sun through peeping the keyhole as many animals can, she reinforces the idea by agreeing to Donald E. Carr’s viewpoint “that only the simplest animals perceive the universe as it is” (21). To be as simple as an infant is the key access to the Zen mind, however, as Dillard confesses, it is not easy to see without verbalization. The more we intend “to gag the commentator, to hush the noise of useless interior babble”, the more we feel troubled. That’s because “the mind’s muddy river, this ceaseless flow of trivia and trash, cannot be dammed, and that trying to dam it is a waste of effort that might lead to madness” (35). The more effort we put in seeing, the more disharmonies we feel. According to Dillard’s research, what we should do is just watch it and let it go:

Instead you must allow the muddy river to flow unheeded in the dim channels of consciousness; you raise your sights; you look along it, mildly, acknowledging its presence without interest and gazing beyond it into the realm of the real where subjects and objects act and rest purely, without utterance (35).

This method of seeing resembles Suzuki’s teaching very much: “Most people live in delusion, involved in their problem, trying to solve their problem. But just to live is actually to live in problems. And to solve the problem is to be part of it, to be one with it” (93). If we think we can solve any problems by our thoughts, we are apart from our surroundings, away from ourselves, and not living in the present moment. Slovic observes that only when Dillard’s mind is silenced, that is when she stops thinking about what she is seeing and when “expectation and habits of thought have been temporarily stilled”, can she experience the mystical vision (80). The second kind of seeing is what Dillard appreciates because it always brings her the mystical experience of being one with the world. Dillard has such experience of epiphany now and then throughout the book. The vision of the tree with the lights in it in “Seeing” and later in “The Present,” when the experience in the gas station in which all the elements of the present moment converge into a joyful acceptance of the world as it actually is are two strong examples.

Such vision comes and goes like a muskrat. It’s not easy to find a muskrat in front of your eyes, and even if it does appear, it disappears quickly.
Therefore, Dillard considers nature a “now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t affair” (18). We do not see wonders all the time. In most of the time we don’t see anything. Even we are as aware as Dillard, seeing the utterly common things like “ant lion traps in sandy soil, monarch pupae near milkweed, skipper larvae in locust leaves, the green gray in the sunset, the wind” (19) very closely, we may be dazzled by what we see. Seeing both the disgusting and the beautiful sights of the world, we may doubt as Dillard does: Was the world made in jest or in earnest? Is God a kind or a malicious creator? If God is good, why is there so much cruelty and pain in the world? Suzuki says, “If you see things without realizing the background of Buddha nature, everything appears to be in the form of suffering. But if you understand the background of existence, you realize that suffering itself is how we live, and how we extend our life. So in Zen sometimes we emphasize the imbalance or disorder of life” (18). Though it’s confusing to see the disharmonies and the polarities of the world, these “discriminations themselves actually are the awareness of the universal existence” (14). As a result, I would like to think that seeing the duality is nothing more than a natural process to access the mystical vision of oneness. I would not like to think duality as something bad or negative that we should avoid completely, instead, I consider it is meant to be beneficial eventually. The point is if we are willing to accept it, or doubt it with an open mind of the beginner. For people who have never practiced Zen may feel the mind of Zen sounds too mystical to understand. But as Suzuki emphasizes, Zen mind is nothing but a beginner's mind. To practice Zen is to practice seeing everything with a beginner’s mind. “The mind of the beginner”, according to Suzuki's definition, “is empty, free of habits of the expert, ready to accept, to doubt, and open to all the possibilities. It is the kind of mind which can see things as they are, which step by step and in a flash can realize the original nature of everything” (xiv). Therefore, as long as we keep opening the eyes and the mind, eventually we will see the “original nature” with wonder.

III. To See or To Ignore It?

At the end of the pilgrim, Annie Dillard concludes “The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest. By a power that is unfathomably secret, and holy, and fleet. There is nothing to be done about it, but ignore it, or see” (275). Since we are not the creators of the world, it's not our responsibilities to figure out how the world is created. Even if we do want to pry the secret of it, it's beyond our knowledge. What we can do is choose to see the world we are around and live with awareness or to just ignore it and live in a blind way.

From Dillard's research on patients' reactions after having an operation and being able to see for the first time, we learned there are three possible ways they may choose to see. First, they may choose to be blind again and refuse to see. As the patient's father found, “his daughter carefully shuts her eyes whenever she wishes to go about the house, especially when she comes to a staircase, and that she is never happier or more at ease than when, by closing her eyelids, she relapses into her former state of total blindness”(30). Second, they may learn to see the world but lost the pure mind. As Dillard elaborates, “A blind man who learns to see is ashamed of his old habits. He dresses up, grooms himself, and tries to make a good impression”, the newly sighted man begins to distinguish good from bad. He lost the mind of seeing without discrimination. Third, they
may learn to see with the pure mind and marvel at whatever they see. The twenty-two-year-old girl is one of them. She was not used to the brightness of the world in the beginning, but later she found gratification and astonishment in everything she watches. She can't help repeatedly exclaiming; ‘Oh God! How beautiful!’ (30).

As Dillard says, “what you see is what you get” (17), how we see the world is very crucial. If we want to feel the happiness of the world, we must be able to see the world with a pure mind. If the world is fairly studded with pennies then the point is who can get excited by mere a penny. Many nonhuman creatures Dillard observes in the pilgrim are as ordinary as pennies. Take the muskrat, to which Dillard is always looking forward, for example, can we be as excited as Dillard if we run into the sight of a muskrat kit paddling from its den? While Suzuki teaches Zen students to have a beginner's mind, Dillard suggests us seeing like an infant because a newly-born infant could see color-patches, “the world unraveled from reason, Eden before Adam gave names” (32). Unfortunately, we were not born yesterday, and we are too far away from being infants. As Dillard confesses, “Form is condemned to an eternal dance macabre with meaning: I can't unpeach the peaches. Nor can I remember ever having seen without understanding; the color-patches of infancy are lost” (32). We have lost the ability of seeing with an infant mind, and we are blind to the holy truth of the world. Consequently, in the pilgrim, Dillard takes a magnifying glass to explore the world. Her efforts to revive her vision and to see the world in a brand-new way are manifested throughout the pilgrim. Though Dillard is a Christian, a Catholic, she is immersed in many different faiths. From an interview with her, we know she believes there is “the God of the whole world” (Natural Wonders 30). She likes to stay in the monasteries to find how other people have seen “the truth of holiness”. Whenever she finds the same God is presented in other parts of the world, she is interested and immersed in their different ways of showing the same thing. There is no doubt that Buddhist tradition is part of her immersion. In fact, the objective of Dillard's pilgrim is similar to the purpose of Suzuki's Zen teaching, “to make you wonder and to answer that wondering with the deepest expression of your own nature” (xiii). With Zen mind, we wonder and see the world anew as if we were newly-born infants. Though we can't deny the negative facts exposed in the pilgrim, the unfathomable God is definitely there, like the pennies, the muskrats, and the tree of lights. The question is to see or to ignore it. Dillard doesn't give us any theological answer, but she sums at the end of the pilgrim: “the dying pray at the last not 'please,' but 'thank you,' as a guest thanks his host at the door” (275). This embracing and grateful attitude toward death is the result of seeing the world as an infant or as a beginner, who tends to laugh quickly and laugh at everything. Life could be joyful. Actually, we live for the wonders, not for the pain or cruelty. The more we revive our vision, the more grace we shall see.
參考文獻


Seeing Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek Through Shunryn Suzuki’s Zen Mind

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Abstract

From Japan, Zen came to the West and took a firm foothold in the United States. Since Shunryn Suzuki is the most influential figure to make Zen widely spread in America, the Zen approach I'm going to use here is primarily based on Shunryn Suzuki’s Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind. Anyone who reads Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek would be impressed by her power of seeing the nature. In the opening chapter, the episode Dillard approached the frog is especially famous and widely quoted by many critics. Surprisingly, the Zen master Shunryn Suzuki praised frogs highly for their special way of sitting and their alertness. Dogen, a Japanese Zen master of the Soto school, to which Suzuki also belongs, once said, "To study Buddhism is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self and to forget the self is to be enlightened by Ten Thousand Things." Most of us see things without any awareness, but Dillard or a person with the Zen mind, like Suzuki, sees everything with great attention. In this paper I will point out how Dillard sees the nonhuman world at Tinker Creek and elaborate what is the nature she sees through the eyes of Zen. Hopefully, my connection between Pilgrim at Tinker Creek and Zen offers readers a new viewpoint as well as enhances readers' appreciation of Annie Dillard's nature.

Keywords: Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Zen, seeing, nature writing, Shunryn Suzuki

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