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THE MYSTICISM OF CHAN: THE ENVIRONMENT-ENLIGHTENMENT NEXUS

Abstract

This paper analyses the close connection between the natural world, Buddhism in general, and Chan in particular. The nonhuman world has played a crucial role in the infancy of both Buddhism and Chan. However, as Chan developed and expanded to meet the challenges and stay relevant, Chan masters interpreted their religious narratives according to the needs of the time. They preferred human history to natural history. By overemphasizing the personal human experience of enlightenment, Chan seemed to overlook everything else, including the more-than-human world. Thus, environmentalists have accused Chan guilty of a certain degree of anthropocentrism that has contributed to the present environmental crisis.

However, a careful study of Chan tradition's narratives, mainly in *gongan*, proves that the natural world has always been part of the Chan spiritual practices and enlightenment experience. Rediscovering this environment-enlightenment nexus opens a new religious horizon where Chan mysticism enhances one's personal enlightenment experience and contributes to environmental protection. Chan shows how nature-inclusive mysticism can help religious traditions stay relevant in the modern world, where secularization theories trumpet the irrelevance of religious and spiritual traditions.

Keywords: Chan, Enlightenment, environmental crisis, *gongan*, Mysticism, Nature Imageries

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1. *Introduction*

The endless outpouring of scholarly works on mysticism proves widespread interest in the subject today. Mysticism is at the heart of every religious tradition. Etymologically, mysticism has a somewhat shrouded past and «was perhaps derived from *muein*, to close the lips or eyes, with the probable primary sense of 'one vowed to keep silence', and hence 'one initiated into the Mysteries».[1] Traditionally, mysticism has been confined to a few unique individuals of sublime spiritual life. However, today «mystical experience, it is claimed, is not merely an example and inspiration from the few to the many, but is something in which most people can share».[2] Chan mysticism too underlines the claim that the enlightenment experience is available to all.

Our interest here is to analyze the critical role the natural world plays in achieving the enlightenment experience in Chan. The beginning, early history, development, and expansion of Buddhism are not the focus of this paper. We focus on rediscovering the environment-enlightenment nexus that has been part of Buddhism in general and Chan in particular. It is true that during the expansion, the Buddhist tradition (Chan tradition too), by overemphasizing the personal human experience of enlightenment, seemed to overlook everything else. Thus, environmentalists have accused Chan guilty of a certain degree of anthropocentrism that has contributed to the present environmental crisis.[3] Anthropocentrism is the idea that humans have intrinsic value and are unique and superior to nature. Nonhuman entities have only instrumental value and can be exploited for the benefit of humankind.

These criticisms are valid. As Chan developed and expanded to meet the challenges and stay relevant, Chan masters interpreted their religious narratives according to the needs of the time. They preferred human history to natural history. Indeed, their interpretations had been human-centered for an extended period. However, a careful study of Chan tradition's narratives contained, especially in *gongan*,[4] proves that the natural world

[1] G. PARRINDER, *Mysticism in the World's Religions*, Oneworld, Oxford, 1995, p. 8.

[2] G. PARRINDER, *Mysticism in the World's Religions*, p. 4.

[3] S. JAMES, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2004, p. 60.

[4] Literally, the word *gongan*, koan/kōan in Japanese, means «a combination of graphs that signifies 'public notice' or 'public announcement'» (H. DUMOULIN, *Zen Buddhism: A History. Vol.1. India and China*, World Wisdom, Indiana, 2005, p. 245). However, in Chan, «koans are brief sayings, dialogues, or anecdotes that have been excerpted from the biographies and discourse records of Ch'an/ Sŏn /Zen patriarchs and held up for some sort of special scrutiny» (T. G. FOULK, "The Form and Function of Koan Literature: A Historical Overview", in *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, edited by S. HEINE and D. S. WRIGHT, Oxford University Press, Oxford,

has always been part of the Chan spiritual practices and enlightenment experience. Rediscovering this environment-enlightenment nexus opens a new religious horizon where Chan mysticism enhances one's personal experience of enlightenment and contributes to environmental protection.

The first part of this paper will briefly explain the relationship between Chan and Mahāyāna Buddhism. The second part will deal with the self-definition of Chan and the rejection of all mediations. In the third part, we will focus on nature imageries contained in *gongan*. In all these parts, our interest will be in the natural world's vital role in the Chan tradition.

2. *The Start: Chan-Mahāyāna Connection*

From the beginning, the natural environment has played a prominent role in Buddhism. Nature is present in the four main events of Buddha's life: birth, enlightenment, first teaching, and death. According to Buddhist legends, Buddha's birth was a miraculous one. On the full moon night, when his mother Mahāmāyā conceived him, she dreamt that a magnificent white elephant carrying a white lotus flower entered her womb through the right side. After ten full months, when it was time to deliver her child, Mahāmāyā returned to her parental home. On the way, while passing through the Lumbinī garden, she was captivated by the beauty of the flowering śāla trees and stepped out of her palanquin. As she rested underneath the śāla trees, the pangs of birth came upon her. She delivered Buddha while standing and holding on to the branch of a śāla tree.[5] This legend shows how the natural world was part of Buddha's birth. The Bodhi tree under which Buddha achieved enlightenment is essential to Buddhist tradition. After the enlightenment, Buddha preached his first sermon in the deer park. He lived a life of a mendicant wanderer, and such a lifestyle

2000, p. 16). *Gongan* is assumed to be a «profound expression or encapsulation of the awakened mind of the patriarch[s]» (T. G. FOULK, "The Form and Function of Koan Literature", p. 16). *Gongan* «encapsulated Zen transcendence in tangible forms» (W. M. BODIFORD, *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1993, p. 143). It is estimated that there are 1700 *gongan* within the Chan tradition. The English titles of some of the famous *gongan* collections are the *Blue Cliff Record,* the *Book of Equanimity,* also known as the *Book of Serenity* – both were collected during the 12th century CE; and the *Gateless Gate*, also known as the *Gateless Barrier* which was collected during the 13th century CE. This paper uses stories from these three *gongan* collections: G. S. WICK, *The Book of Equanimity: Illuminating Classic Zen Koans,* Wisdom Publication, Boston, 2005; K. SEKIDA (*trans.*), *Two Zen Classics: The Gateless Gate and the Blue Cliff Records*, Shambhala, Boston, 2005.

[5] R. GETHIN, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998. P. 19.

cannot but be dependent on the natural environment. Even during Buddha's death, nature was present.[6]

During its growth and expansion, Buddhism witnessed schisms. Buddhism can generally be divided into two: the 'Inferior Way/Lesser Vehicle' (Mainstream Buddhism/ Hīnayāna[7]), of which the Theravāda School (Path of the Elders) is the living representative. Mainstream Buddhism is considered to be older and more conservative. It emphasizes personal liberation accessible only to the arhat, the saintly purified one who transcends all conditioning, defilements, and desires through self-discipline and intensive meditation. Since transcendence and ultimate detachment from this world are the goals, Theravāda Buddhism has paid little attention to the function of the natural world in the spiritual quest. «The analysis of reality growing out of the theory of non-soul (*anatta*) undermined the positive evaluation of Nature, since the environment was analysed into the psychological and perceptual components of consciousness which produced the delusory consciousness of an objective permanent, abiding world».[8]

The 'Great Way/Greater Vehicle' (Mahāyāna Buddhism) rejects this old, selfish, conservative tradition and speaks of the Bodhisattva. Mahāyāna tradition is an amalgamation of different trends united by the Bodhisattva ideal. Unlike the arhat, who works for personal liberation, the Bodhisattva tirelessly works to liberate all sentient beings. Bodhisattvas «are beings who are dedicated to the universal awakening, or enlightenment, of everyone… A bodhisattva, carrying out the work of buddhas, vows not to personally settle into the salvation of final buddhahood until

[6] R. GETHIN, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 26. Many scholarly works explain nature's crucial role in early Buddhism and its teachings. For more, see A. Bloom, "Buddhism, Nature and the Environment", in *The Eastern Buddhist*, NEW SERIES, Vol. 5, No. 1, May 1972, pp. 115-129; L. E. SPONSEL and P. NATADECHA-SPONSEL, "Buddhist Views of Nature and the Environment", in *Nature Across Cultures: Views of Nature and the Environment in Non-Western Cultures*, edited by H. SELIN, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, 2003, pp. 351-371; S. DHAMMIKA, *Nature and the Environment in Early Buddhism*, Buddha Dhamma Mandala Society, Singapore, 2015.

[7] At times it is also called Sectarian Buddhism, Conservative Buddhism, *Śrāvakayāna*, Nikāya Buddhism, and recently Mainstream Buddhism. Contemporary scholarship seldom uses the term 'Hīnayāna' since it is pejorative.

[8] A. BLOOM, "Buddhism, Nature and the Environment", p. 119. *Anatta* is a critical Buddhist doctrine that asserts the non-existence of a permanent self or essence. For more, see N. Q. HOANG, "The Doctrine of Not-Self (*anattā*) in Early Buddhism", in *International Review of Social Research*, 9.1, 2019, pp. 18-27.

she or he can assist all beings throughout the vast reaches of time and space to fully realize this liberated experience».[9]

The liberation of all sentient beings is one of the central teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which holds the view that all sentient beings intrinsically possess Buddha-nature,[10] and they need to realize that. «This means everyone has the potential to achieve Buddhahood or full enlightenment. Buddha nature thought, then, affirms that the goal of Buddhism is open to all; there is no one inherently incapable of achieving perfect wisdom and freedom».[11] The term Buddha-nature is generally used «in the sense of the nature or essence of the Buddha existent inside every *sattva* or sentient being…: that is, 'all beings have Buddha nature'».[12] The most developed statement of this doctrine could be that of Dōgen, a Japanese Buddhist master, who says that all beings are intrinsically Buddhas. All beings, sentient and insentient, literally *are* the Buddha-nature. Dōgen says, «sentient beings are Buddha-nature. Grass, trees, and lands are mind; thus they are sentient beings. Because they are sentient beings they are Buddha-nature. Sun, moon, and stars are mind; thus they are sentient beings; thus they are Buddha-nature».[13] With the theme of Buddha nature, Mahāyāna

[9] T. D. LEIGHTON, *Faces of Compassion. Classic Bodhisattva Archetypes and Their Modern Expression: An Introduction to Mahayana Buddhism*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2012, p. 25. For more, see Y. KRISHAN, "The Origin and Development of the Bodhisattva Doctrine", in *East and West*, Vol. 34, No. 1/3, Sept 1984, pp. 199-232.

[10] The doctrine of Buddha-nature is a theory that has invited voices of criticism, especially in recent Buddhist scholarship. Some scholars even argue that this doctrine is not Buddhist (P. L. SWANSON, "Zen Is Not Buddhism: Recent Japanese Critiques of Buddha-Nature", in *Numen*, 40, Fasc. 2, May 1993, pp. 115-149) because it appears «to contradict basic Buddhist teachings such as the universality of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), and the doctrines of no-abiding-self (*anātman*) and impermanence (*anitya*)» (R. KING, "Is 'Buddha-Nature' Buddhist? Doctrinal Tensions in the Śrīmālā Sūtra: An Early Tathāgathagharba Text", in *Numen*, 42, Fasc. 1, Jan 1995, p. 15). There is no uniformity among those who accept this doctrine (MING-WOOD LIU, "The Yogaacaaraa and Maadhyamika Interpretation of the Buddha nature Concept in Chinese Buddhism", in *Philosophy East and West*, 35, no. 2, April 1985, pp. 171-192). However, despite criticisms, this concept remains an essential component in East Asian Buddhism, and I speak of Buddha-nature, as it is generally understood.

[11] S. B. KING, "The Buddha Nature: True Self as Action", in *Religious Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Jun 1984, pp. 257-258.

[12] T. JIKIDŌ and 高崎直道, "The Tathāgatagarbha Theory Reconsidered: Reflections on Some Recent Issues in Japanese Buddhist Studies", in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 27, no. 1/2, Spring 2000, p. 80.

[13] K. NISHIYAMA and J. STEVENS (*trans.*), *A Complete English Translation of Dōgen Zenji's Shōbōgenzō: The Eye and Treasury of the True Law* Vol. IV, Nakayama Shōbō, Tokyo, 1983, p. 134. For more, see A. MASAO, "Dōgen on Buddha Nature", in *The Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. 4, No. 1, May 1971, pp. 28-71.

Buddhism promotes a deep appreciation and awareness of the spiritual value of nature and recognizes the significant function of the natural world in its spiritual practices.

Here it is also worth noting that among many theories about the historical origins of Mahāyāna, scholars like Paul Harrison[14] hold the view that the early development of Mahāyāna reflects the influence of forest-dwelling monks. Again, we see the impact of the natural world in the infancy of the Mahāyāna tradition.

The philosophical and contemplative teachings of Mahāyāna reached their heights in Chan, which is often called the meditation school of Mahāyāna Buddhism.[15] Just like the Mahāyāna tradition, the natural world occupies a central place in the very beginning of the Chan tradition as well. Case 6 in the *Gateless Gate* mentions the following *gongan*:

> When Shakyamuni Buddha was at Mount Grdhrakutta, he held out a flower to his listeners. Everyone was silent. Only Mahakashyapa broke into a broad smile. The Buddha said, «I have the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of Formless, and the Subtle Dharma Gate, independent of words and transmitted beyond doctrine. This I have entrusted to Mahakashyapa».[16]

Chan tradition repeats this story to affirm its unique self-identity as a special mind-to-mind transmission that originated with none other than Shakyamuni Buddha himself. In such an important story, we see the mention of the natural world – a mountain and a flower.

Recently, many studies have been done on Buddhist environmental ethics in general and Chan in particular. Scholars put forward many theoretical/ philosophical/ doctrinal explanations – such as identifying nature as Dharma, stressing the centrality of three Buddhist ethical values (gratitude, loving-kindness, and happiness) for an environmental philosophy, the doctrines of dependent co-origination and karma,[17] and the doctrines

[14] P. HARRISON, "Searching for the Origins of the Mahāyāna: What are We Looking for?", in *The Eastern Buddhist*, new series XXVIII, I, 1995, pp. 48-69. Now reprinted in *Buddhism: Critical Concepts in Religious Studies*, edited by P. WILLIAMS, Vol. III, 2005, pp. 164-80. London: Routledge.

[15] H. DUMOULIN, *Zen Buddhism*, p. 27.

[16] K. SEKIDA, *Two Zen Classics*, p, 41.

[17] For more on these doctrines and how they affect Buddhist environmental activities in different parts of the world, see M. E. TUCKER and D. R. WILLIAMS (*eds.*), *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

of nonviolence and Buddha nature[18] – that could form the foundation of Chan's attitude towards nature. The natural world plays a significant role in many *gongan*, Chan spiritual and monastic practices, and other Chan-related activities. We will discuss it in the third part of this paper.

3. *The Search: Chan Identity*

As mentioned already, Chan Buddhism traces its roots to Buddha,[19] the founder of the Buddhist tradition. Case 6 of the *Gateless Gate*, mentioned above, came to be accepted as the traditional interpretation of Chan history. Chan was transmitted to China by a central Asian meditation monk called Bodhidharma,[20] who was the 28th Indian patriarch and also the 1st Chinese patriarch of the Chan tradition.

Contemporary scholarship on Chan shows that the history of early Chan is more complex than it is presented in the traditional account. Scholars point out that from the first half of the 8th CE, the Chan tradition invented legends, created stories, and fabricated lineages to establish the uniqueness of Chan as an independent tradition distinct from other schools of Buddhism.

The four-line declaration[21] describing the integral features of Chan identity was:

1) A special transmission outside the teachings,
2) Not established on words and letters,
3) Pointing directly to a person's mind,

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[18] S. JAMES, *Zen Buddhism and Environmental Ethics*. For more on Buddhist environmental ethics, see S. KAZA and K. KRAFT (*eds.*), *Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism*. Shambhala Publications Inc., Boston, 2000.

[19] Although we know very little about the historicity of the person of Buddha, reducing him to a myth or a legend is not acceptable. For more on historical Buddha and the beginning of Buddhism, see H. DUMOULIN, *Zen Buddhism*; R. GETHIN, *The Foundations of Buddhism*.

[20] Scholars like Bernard Faure interpret Bodhidharma «as a textual and religious paradigm and not …as a historical figure or a psychological essence» (B. FAURE, "Bodhidharma as Textual and Religious Paradigm", in *History of Religions*, vol. 25, No. 3, Feb 1986, p. 190).

[21] The details of the origin, development, and implications of this four-line aphorism are beyond the scope of this paper. For more, see A. WELTER, "Mahākāśyapa's Smile: Silent Transmission and the Kung-an (Kōan) Tradition", in *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, edited by S. Heine and D. S. WRight, pp. 75-109, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000; D. T. SUZUKI, "Zen Buddhism", in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 1, no. 1, Jan 1938, pp. 48-57; I. MIURA and R. F. SASAKI, *Zen Dust: The History of the Koan and Koan Study in Rinzai (Lin- chi) Ch'an*, Brace and World, New York, 1966.

4) Seeing one's nature and achieving Buddhahood.

This self-definition of Chan continues to be the standard expression of the essence and identity of Chan in modern Chan-related writings.

The first two slogans speak of the uniqueness of spiritual transmission in Chan. This spiritual transmission is mind-to-mind, not dependent on any medium of language. The Chan notion of the inadequacy of language finds expression throughout Chan literature. Mahākāśyapa's smile, mentioned in Case 6 of the *Gateless Gate*, is the best example. Again, the *Platform Sūtra*, an important early Chan text to substantiate the special transmission, describes how the Dharma was transmitted from the fifth patriarch Hongren to Huineng, the sixth patriarch:

> At midnight the Fifth Patriarch called me into the hall and expounded the Diamond Sutra to me. Hearing it but once, I was immediately awakened, and that night I received the Dharma. None of the others knew anything about it. Then he transmitted to me the Dharma of Sudden Enlightenment and the robe, saying: 'I make you the Sixth Patriarch. The robe is the proof and is to be handed down from generation to generation. My Dharma must be transmitted from mind to mind. You must make people awaken to themselves'.[22]

The last two slogans speak of spontaneous, sudden, and direct awakening.[23] In Chan tradition, it is not the person of Buddha, but his enlightenment experience takes the central stage. The Chan sayings like 'if you find Buddha, kill him!', 'there is no Śākyamuni in the past and in the future no Maitreya', 'the good old Śākya has given us a village comedy,' etc. speak about the insignificant role the person of Buddha plays in the Chan tradition.[24] In Chan, the enlightenment experience has the last word. «There is no Zen without satori [Japanese Buddhist term for awakening], which is indeed the alpha and omega of Zen Buddhism».[25] Satori «is the goal, the meaning and the heart of Zen».[26] One of the favorite sayings of Tai-hui

[22] P. B. YAMPOLSKY (*trans.*), *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch.* Columbia University Press, New York, 1967, p. 133.

[23] Not all Chan schools accepted the teaching of sudden awakening. For more on the controversy between the Southern and Northern Schools over sudden and gradual awakening, see H. DUMOULIN, *Zen Buddhism,* Chapter 7.

[24] H. DUMOULIN, *Zen Buddhism,* p. 11.

[25] B. PHILLIPS (*ed.*), *The essentials of Zen Buddhism: An anthology of the writings of Daisetz T. Suzuki,* Rider & Co., London, 1963, p. 154.

[26] C. HUMPHREYS, *Zen Buddhism*. Unwin Books, London, 1961, p. 108.

(Daiye), a great advocate of enlightenment, was «Zen has no words: when you have satori, you have everything».[27]

This emphasis on the immediacy of enlightenment and rhetoric of experience made Chan very iconoclastic, rejecting all mediation. However, claims made in this self-definition of Chan have come under rigorous criticism in contemporary Buddhist scholarship. Scholars like Bernard Faure,[28] Dale S. Wright,[29] Youru Wang,[30] and so on have written extensively on the role language plays in Chan tradition. Others like G. Victor Sōgen Hori,[31] Robert E. Buswell,[32] Robert H. Sharf[33], and William M. Bodiford[34] argue that the transformative inner experience seldom plays a central role in traditional Buddhist monastic life and spiritual practices.

While vehemently defending the Chan's unique self-identity, which centers around special mind-to-mind transmission and direct awakening, Chan masters intentionally and/or unintentionally neglected the natural world's crucial role in the awakening process.

4. *The Stress: The Environment-Enlightenment Nexus in gongan*

For an extended period, the Chan tradition subordinated everything to the awakening experience and rejected all mediation due to the immediacy of enlightenment. We cannot blame the tradition for doing that. In order to stay relevant to a particular cultural and intellectual milieu, the Chan

[27] D. T. SUZUKI, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: 2nd Series*, Rider & Company, London, 1958, p. 30.

[28] B. FAURE, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1993.

[29] D. S. WRIGHT, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998; "Rethinking Transcendence: The Role of Language in Zen Experience", in *Philosophy East and West*, 42, no.1, Jan 1992, pp. 113-138; "The Discourse of Awakening: Rhetorical Practice in Classical Ch'an Buddhism", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 61, no.1, Spring 1993, pp. 23-40.

[30] Y. WANG, "Liberating Oneself from the Absolutized Boundary of Language: A Liminological Approach to the Interplay of Speech and Silence in Chan Buddhism", in *Philosophy East and West*, 51, no.1, Jan 2001, pp. 83-99.

[31] G. V. S. HORI, "Teaching and Learning in the Rinzai Zen Monastery", in *Journal of Japanese Studies*, 20, no. 1, Winter 1994, pp. 5-35.

[32] R. E. BUSWELL JR., *The Zen Monastic Experience,* Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1992.

[33] R. H. SHARF, "Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience", in *Numen*, 42, no. 3, Oct 1995, pp. 228-283; "Experience", in *Critical Terms in Religious Studies*, edited by M. C. TAYLOR, pp. 94-116. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998.

[34] W. M. BODIFORD, *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan*.

masters could not but prefer particular dimensions of their tradition to others. The growth and expansion of Buddhism in Chinese culture were not smooth. The Chan tradition faced many challenges and persecution from the Chinese cultural, intellectual, political, religious, and social arena. Nevertheless, none of these challenges could eliminate Chan. The Chan tradition continues to be a growing spiritual tradition today. This shows the adaptability of the Chan tradition.

Today, faced with the bleak reality of the environmental crisis, the Chan tradition is rediscovering the environment-enlightenment nexus to address environmental issues, especially here in Taiwan, and thus stay relevant in the current milieu. There is a renewed academic interest in Chan and environmentalism. In this part of the paper, we will focus only on the nature imageries in *gongan*.

Why *gongan*? We have briefly discussed the literal meaning, definition, and content of *gongan* (see footnote 6). Here, we will deal with the crucial role *gongan* plays in Chan liturgy, meditation practices, and rituals. *Gongan* is «the most distinctive aspect of Zen theory and practice».[35] Many even argue that enlightenment is impossible without *gongan* practice. «Without the koan the Zen consciousness loses its pointer, and there will never be a state of satori».[36] Robert H. Sharf states that *gongan* «are treated not so much as practical guides for meditation, but rather as liturgies to be memorized for ritual performance».[37] *Gongan*(s) are not mere psycholinguistic puzzles and a literary genre but are «ritual performances – they are staged, worked on, enacted, watched, and judged».[38] In the words of G. Victor Sōgen Hori, «a kōan is not a description but a performance».[39] The abbot of the Zen Mountain Monastery, John Daido Loori, writes, «Zen teachers don't routinely analyze kōans in terms of their psychology, philosophy, structure, or dynamics. We do kōans».[40] Ritual use of the *gongan* is well

[35] S. HEINE, "Does the Koan Have Buddha-Nature? The Zen Koan as Religious Symbol", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 58, no. 3, Autumn 1990, p. 360.

[36] D. T. SUZUKI, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, p. 88.

[37] R. H. SHARF, "Buddhist Modernism", p. 243.

[38] B. STEPHENSON, "The Koan as Ritual Performance", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73, no. 2, June 2005, p. 476.

[39] G. V. S. HORI, "Kōan and *Kenshō* in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum", p. 304.

[40] Quoted in B. Stephenson, "The Koan as Ritual Performance", p. 481.

documented in the Rinzai tradition,[41] in medieval Sōtō Zen[42] and in Korean Zen.[43] In short, *gongan* literature plays a central role in Chan tradition.

The natural world is part of the *gongan* literature. Many *gongan* make direct or indirect references to the nonhuman world.[44] There are many *gongan* in which mountain landscapes play an important role. «Sacred or exotic mountain peaks, recesses, valleys, and caves, appear in numerous kōan cases».[45] «Mountains … were the primary symbol evoked by Zen masters that defined their identity and enhanced the vibrancy of their authority… Zen masters, known as 'mountain openers' had a complex relation with mountains».[46] Many of the early Chan masters lived in solitude near rivers or on mountains. The first five patriarchs of Chinese Chan history – Bodhidharma, Huike, Sengcan, Daoxin, Hongren – lived, or took refuge when persecuted, on the mountains.[47] From early times many Chan temples and monasteries were built on mountains.[48] For the Chan masters, mountains offered «relief from the turmoil of urban life. … Mountain landscapes became the object of artistic contemplation».[49] Once a monk asked Hongren, «Why can't the study of the Buddha Dharma take place in cities where there are many people, rather than only deep in the mountains?» Hung-jen [Hongren] answered, «You must seek refuge for your spirit in remote mountain valleys, escaping far from the troubles of the dusty world».[50] «In Zen rhetoric, the terms 'entering a mountain' or passing through a 'mountain gate' refer to embarking on a spiritual journey, usually in a mountainous domain where monasteries or hermitages are located. As time went by… [Zen] temples in valleys or even in urban areas were still referred to as 'mountains'».[51]

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[41] G. V. S. HORI, "Kōan and *Kenshō* in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum"; "Teaching and Learning in the Rinzai Zen Monastery". Rinzai School is one of the two (the other is Sōtō school) major Japanese Zen Sects. It is an extension of the Chinese school *Linji zong*. It was brought to Japan by Eisai Zenji (1141-1215).

[42] W. M. BODIFORD, *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan,* pp. 143-162. Sōtō School is an extension of the Chinese school *Caodong zong*, and it was brought to Japan by Dōgen Zenji (1200-1253).

[43] R. E. BUSWELL JR., *The Zen Monastic Experience,* pp. 149-160.

[44] For a very general overview of nature imageries contained in *gongan* literature, see Appendix.

[45] S. HEINE, *Opening a Mountain: Kōans of the Zen Masters*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, p. 2.

[46] S. HEINE, *Opening a Mountain*, p. 20.

[47] H. DUMOULIN, *Zen Buddhism,* Chapter 6.

[48] K. SEKIDA, *Two Zen Classics*, pp. 100-101.

[49] S. HEINE, *Opening a Mountain*, p. 22.

[50] As quoted in S. HEINE, *Opening a Mountain,* p. 23.

[51] S. HEINE, *Opening a Mountain*, p. 24.

Animals, birds, and fish too are part of *gongan*. In an article titled 'The monastery cat in cross-cultural perspective: Cat poems of the Zen masters', T. H. Barrett[52] analyzes the role cats play in Chan tradition.

> The most commonly used *gongan* in Chan awakening practices is the 'Mu' *gongan*.
>
> A monk asked Jōshū [Zhaozhou], «Has a dog the Buddha nature?» Jōshū answered, «Mu».[53]

Generations of Chan masters have used this *gongan* to help practitioners free the mind from analytic thinking and thus experience enlightenment. Practicing 'Mu' is often considered to be synonymous with practicing Chan.[54] An animal, a dog, plays the central role in this 'Mu' *gongan*.

Numerous *gongan* mention vegetation. Gardens, grass, flower, tree, weed, and so on are part of Chan practitioners' spiritual practices. Other nonhuman entities like clouds, dust, earth, fire, lake, light, ocean, rain, river, sea, sky, snow, stone, water, wind, and so on play a vital role in *gongan*. Even celestial entities and seasons have become part of many *gongan*.

Chan masters often chose their names and pennames associated with nature. Names of the Chan masters Huang Bo Xi Yun, Dong Shan Liang Jie, Gui Shan Ling You and many others were associated with mountains. Crazy cloud was the pen name of Ikkyu.[55] Hakuin signed all his letters and documents, «Hakuin, the old heretic who sits under the sala tree».[56] «Fascinated by the simplicity and stark beauty of plants, (Nyogen) Senzaki loved to compare himself to a 'homeless mushroom'».[57]

The fascination for nature can also be found in choosing the space and name of the monasteries. James Robson points out that masters were meticulous in choosing the monastic sites. «The location of a monastery was thought to have a direct connection not only to the individual practices of the monks, but also to the overall success or failure of the monastery».[58]

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[52] T.H. BARRETT, "The Monastery Cat in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Cat Poems of the Zen Masters", in *Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia: Places of Practice*, edited by J. A. BENN, L. MEEKS and J. ROBSON, pp. 107-124, Routledge, Oxfordshire, 2010.

[53] K. SEKIDA, *Two Zen Classics,* p. 27.

[54] J. I. FORD and M. M. BLACKER (*eds.*), *The Book of Mu: Essential Wrings on Zen's Most Important Koan*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2011.

[55] P. BESSERMAN and M. STEGER, *Crazy Clouds: Zen Radicals, Rebels, and Reformers*, Shambhala, London, 1991, p. 3.

[56] P. BESSERMAN and M. STEGER, *Crazy Clouds,* p. 120.

[57] P. BESSERMAN and M. Steger, *Crazy Clouds,* p. 156.

[58] J. ROBSON, "Monastic Spaces and Sacred Traces: Facets of Chinese Buddhist Monastic Records", in *Buddhist Monasticism in East Asia: Places of Practice*, edited by J. A. BENN, L, MEEKS, and J. ROBSON, Routledge, London, 2010, p. 49.

He continues, «historical records for many monasteries begin with descriptions detailing the types of trees, plants, topography, and other noteworthy (or anomalous) natural features of the monastic setting».[59]

Traditionally, Buddhist monasteries have been named after nature, especially mountains. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Chan monk, named his monastery in Paris 'the Sweet Potato Community', later re-named 'Plum Village'. In Taiwan, Master Sheng Yen named his Buddhist organization the 'Dharma Drum Mountain', *fa gu shan*. Master Hsing Yun founded *'Fo Guang Shan'* (literally 'Buddha's light mountain').

Nature has been used as a metaphor to speak about enlightenment. Students of Chan are familiar with Chan's famous *ten ox herding* pictures that metaphorically depict the path of awakening. «The ox in the pictures stands for our true nature; the ox herder represents those in search of the truth about their deepest self, and the ten pictures represent the successive steps one must take to realize one's true nature».[60] Another example is the poetries of Dōgen:

> «Snow covering the red blossoms,
> Unfettered by the dusty world;
> Is it too cluttered even in this secluded mountain –
> Who can really say?
> When a single plum blossom opens,
> Therein is held the awakening
> Of the exquisite beauty of spring».[61]

«Images of the natural world are so intertwined that the opening of a plum blossom is used as a metaphor for the moment of enlightenment. While this is not unusual for either a religion or even poetry to perform in this way, Zen clearly holds the natural world in high reverence».[62]

Nature played an essential role in Chan monastic life too. Earlier, a robe and a bowl were adequate to meet the meager needs of a mendicant. However, as the number grew, monasteries had to find ways of sustaining themselves. Manuel labor which included «rice-planting, farming, and bamboo-cutting, along with other activities»[63] became an important aspect of monastic life. Robert E. Buswell points out that fieldwork has been

[59] J. ROBSON, "Monastic Spaces and Sacred Traces", p. 49.

[60] R. KENNEDY, *Zen Gifts to Christians*, Continuum, New York, 2004, p. 5.

[61] S. HEINE, 1997. *The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace*, Tuttle Publishing, Boston, 1997, p. 128.

[62] S. JAYMES, "Environmentalism and Zen Buddhism", in *The Osprey Journal of ideas and Inquiry*, All Volumes (2001-2008). Paper 91, 2004, p. 4.

[63] H. DUMOULIN, *Zen Buddhism,* p. 170.

essential to monastic training in Korea.[64] Every action/deed done was interpreted not merely as manual labor but was oriented to awakening. «The monks, after all, come to realize their enlightenment through the daily routine of the monastery».[65]

5. *The Environment-Enlightenment Nexus: Implications*

As we have already discussed, the natural world has played a vital role during the birth, development, and expansion of the Chan tradition. However, during its development, the search for a unique Chan identity necessitated the invention of a self-definition, which emphasized the immediacy of enlightenment experience and vehemently rejected all sorts of mediation, including the natural environment. However, Chan masters knew very well the theoretical possibility and practical unviability of the rhetoric of the immediacy of enlightenment. Knowingly and/or unknowingly, Chan masters often resorted to the nonhuman world to achieve, affirm and exhibit their enlightenment experiences. Chan masters also used the more-than-human world as a skillful means to guide others to enlightenment and to test the authenticity of their experience. Consequently, throughout Chan tradition's history, the *gongan* literature, pregnant with nature imageries, has remained at the center of the awakening process.

The environment-enlightenment nexus in Chan mysticism has several implications. First of all, this nexus is ideally in tune with one of the central doctrines of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which holds the view that Buddha-nature is inherent in all sentient beings and all have the intrinsic potential to attain enlightenment. Mystical experience is not the privilege of a few human beings. Everyone can attain awakening, and Chan tradition goes a step further, holding the view that everything that belongs to the more-than-human world too can experience awakening. This view upholds the divine/sacred/spiritual dimension of the nonhuman world and contradicts the accusation of some environmentalists that most religious narratives of the natural environment are very anthropocentric and look at the nonhuman world only through an economic perspective.

Secondly, since Buddha-nature is present in all beings, everything possesses intrinsic value. Although Chan neglected the natural environment for some time in its history, the stress on the environment-enlightenment nexus powers Chan to boldly challenge those environmentalists who accuse religions in general and Chan in particular of the present

[64] R. E. Buswell Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience*, p. 128.
[65] R. E. Buswell Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience*, p. 9.

environmental crisis. Chan compels critics to acknowledge and appreciate the religious leaders' contemporary nature-friendly interpretations of religious narratives and exhortations to adherents to contribute constructively to environmental protection. The best example is the crucial role Buddhist/Chan adherents have played in making Taiwan one of the environmental leaders in the Asia Pacific region.

Thirdly, Chan mysticism is an excellent model for other religious traditions' mysticism. A careful study of religious traditions' narratives proves they are very nature-centered in their infancy. History of various religious traditions has proven that spirituality devoid of nature would harm the human-nature relationship. The present environmental crisis demands the rediscovery of the environmental-enlightenment nexus. This paper focused on the nonhuman world's vital role in Chan mystical experiences. In recent years, Buddhist/Chan traditions have done that rediscovery and have shown how nature-inclusive mysticism can help religious traditions to stay relevant in the modern world, where secularization theories trumpet the irrelevance of religious and spiritual traditions.

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Appendix **A general overview of nature imageries in *gongan***					
			The Book of Equanimity	*The Gateless Gate*	*The Blue Cliff Records*
Mountains, peaks And Valleys	Specific	Great Mountain (Taizan/Taisan)	Cases 10, 60	Case 31	Case 24
		The South Mountain	Cases 15, 24, 31		Case 22
		The North Mountain	Case 31		
		Mount Sumeru	Cases 19, 44		
		The mountains of Ro province	Case 79		
		Mount Grdhrakuta/ The Vulture Peak		Case 06,	
		Taiyu Mountain		Case 23	
		Mount Tai-i		Case 40	
		Mount Rozan			Case 34
		Nanrei Mountains			Case 51
		Mount Tōhō			Case 85
	General		Cases 08, 32, 35, 41, 100	Cases 02, 28	Cases 04, 18, 25, 26, 60, 62, 76, 83,
Animals, birds and		Buffalo		Case 38	Case 24
		Cat	Cases 09, 69	Case 14	Cases 63, 64
		Chicken	Case 35		
		Cow	Cases 60, 69		
		Crane	Case 28		
		Deer			Case 81
		Dog	Case 18	Case 01	
		Donkey	Cases 13, 23, 52, 65		Cases 52, 79
		Dove	Case 44		
		Duck			Case 53
		Falcon	Case 44		
		Fish	Cases 33, 61	Case 48	Case 49
		Fox	Case 08	Case 02	Case 93

fish	Frog	Case 29		Case 38
	Garuda	Case 44		
	Goose	Case 41		
	Horse	Case 14	Case 32	Cases 52, 65
	Lion	Case 26		Case 39
	Monkey	Case 72		
	Ox	Cases 25, 29		Case 38
	Oyster			Case 90
	Partridge		Case 24	
	Phoenix	Case 35		
	Rabbit/Hare	Case 56		Case 90
	Rhinoceros	Case 25		Case 91
	Snake	Cases 24, 59		Cases 22, 35
	Tiger			Case 85
	Tortoise	Case 14		
	Whales	Case 29		Case 38
Vegetation (garden, grass, flower, tree, weed...)		Cases 04, 12, 15, 28, 47, 59, 70, 85, 87, 89, 91, 96	Cases 05, 06, 24, 26, 28, 37, 43	Cases 05, 11, 12, 16, 21, 27, 30, 34, 36, 39, 40, 50, 81, 82
Lake, ocean, rain, river, sea, snow, water...		Cases 02, 28, 29, 31, 32, 44, 51, 52, 61, 79, 99, 100	Cases 11, 15, 23, 28, 41, 42, 48	Cases 01, 13, 18, 38, 42, 46, 50, 55, 60, 78, 80, 96
Seasons		Cases 50, 71, 89	Cases 15, 24,	Cases 08, 36, 51, 98
Cloud, dust, earth, fire, light, sky, stone, wind...		Cases 11, 16, 30, 32, 34, 35, 52, 68, 92, 100	Case 29	Cases 27, 29, 31, 40, 52, 55, 61, 79, 83, 86, 87
Celestial entity (moon, space, sun...)		Cases 21, 35, 52, 76, 77	Cases 19, 28	Cases 90, 100