

The Kōan of Nietzsche's Eternal Recurrence and Albert Saijo's Zensational Rhapsody

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BY AN ODD LEGERDEMAIN OF FATE WE ARE
TRANSPORTED TO A SMALL CLEARING IN AN
UPLAND 'ŌHI'A LEHUA HĀPU'U FOREST AT 4000'
EDGING AN ACTIVE VOLCANO – ANOTHER EDGE –
LIKE THEY SAY IF YER NOT LIVIN ON THE EDGE YER
TAKIN UP TOO MUCH SPACE (Saijo 1997: 199)¹

Living on the Edge

In these closing lines to Albert Saijo's first solo collection of poems, *OUTSPEAKS: A RHAPSODY*, the poet recounts how he and his wife ended up living in an almost pristine native Hawaiian forest on the edge of the active volcano Kīlauea on the Big Island of Hawai'i. The quote he ends with has been attributed to various sources, but the basic idea expresses something similar to the famous lines from Nietzsche: “the secret to harvesting the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from existence is to *live dangerously!* Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius!” (Nietzsche 2018: 182).² One of the beat poets, Saijo is probably most known for the legendary trip he took with Jack Kerouac and Lew Welch from San Francisco to New York in 1959. The three composed haiku all along the way, with the poems later published as the book *Trip Trap*. The beats were known for their affinity for Zen, and in Kerouac's novel *Big Sur*, the character George Baso, based on Saijo, is described as “the little Japanese Zen master hepcat sitting crosslegged on the back mattress of Dave's [Lew's] Jeepster” (Kerouac 2019, 39).³

I can certainly attest to the dangerousness of living on the slopes of an active volcano. It turns out, by an odd twist of fate, I now live in the house built by Saijo on the edge of the volcano. The modest wooden cottage is quite unassuming from the outside, but from within it is quite the poetic space with plenty skylights flooding the space with sunlight, and hand-made windows all around opening up vistas into that beautiful 'ōhi'a lehua hāpu'u forest. Often the only sound is from the wind in the trees and the songs of the scarlet *apapane*, one of the native birds which are endangered, but abundant in this forest canopy. Sometimes I think the songs of the *apapane* must be the sound of paradise; and it turns out this place, the neighborhood where I live, is quite aptly named as it is called *Kalani Honua* — the earthly heaven. And yet this place of tranquil beauty

sits only a couple miles from the edge of the volcano. During the eruption of 2018, the greatest in a couple hundred years, the summit region was rocked by constant earthquakes as the summit caldera collapsed as a result of the massive volume of lava that poured out far down below destroying hundreds of homes and dramatically transforming the landscape. For the last couple of years a lava lake has been steadily rising again in the caldera, and if one walks out to the edge at night one can often see spectacular glowing fountains and rivers of lava. Living here one is constantly aware of living dangerously as we know there is always the possibility of another great earthquake and eruption of the volcano.

And yet it seems like we are all living quite precariously these days. Just as we thought we might be in the final phase of the global pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine begins, with terrible loss of life among innocent civilians, and the looming danger of a wider, perhaps even nuclear war. And buried in the news below the latest on the virus, and the carnage from the ruthless shelling of cities, is story about temperatures in the Antarctic 70° F above normal. “Scientists are flabbergasted” reports the *Washington Post*⁴; and it is easy to see why as this would seem to provide strong evidence that the climate change doomsayers may have been right all along in warning that we have already passed the tipping point, and are entering a time of abrupt climate change, and the possible near-term extinction of our life on earth. Will humanity ever be able to overcome the threat of nuclear war, or the ecological catastrophe that is impending?

Nietzsche often reflected on the challenge of facing hard truths, and it is a very hard truth that we face today — the prospects for the future of life on earth, at least for human beings, are not at all very bright. In the preface to his unfinished, posthumously published final manuscript, Nietzsche describes a great crisis facing humanity, the “history of the next two centuries” as he frames it: “This future speaks even now in a hundred signs, this destiny announces itself everywhere; for this music of the future all ears are cocked even now. For some time now, our whole European culture has been moving as toward a catastrophe, with a tortured tension that is growing from decade to decade: restlessly, violently, headlong, like a river that want to reach the end, that no longer reflects, that is afraid to reflect” (Nietzsche 1968: 3).⁵

In facing this crisis, Nietzsche sees a need for preparatory human beings, those “with the ability to remain silent, solitary, resolute, contended with and persistent in invisible activity,” human beings, he continues, “who have an inner inclination to seek in all things that which is to

be overcome (*überwinden*) in them” (Nietzsche 2018: 181). This is why he recommends living dangerously. It is not a time for complacency, for resting content on the values of the past, but rather for adventurous spirits capable of living on the edge and pushing the evolution of our values.

Remaining Loyal to the Earth

This task of overcoming would be the central focus of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche’s narrative in which the protagonist comes down from his mountain solitude to teach new teachings—about the need for humanity to further evolve, to overcome the values of the past, and become capable of remaining loyal to the earth. Nietzsche thought that the values underlying our civilization have been expressions of the longing for another world. In his diagnosis of the problem, the longing to free the soul from the prison of the body and earthly existence led to a profound misunderstanding in which human beings did not understand themselves, the natural world, or their relationship to the rest of nature. The human soul was taken to be completely separate from the body, the earth and all other living creatures were reduced to soulless machines, while human beings were understood to be the only beings that mattered, with all the rest of nature merely serving human interests. From the early to the late writings, Nietzsche was sharply critical of this anthropocentrism, emphasizing in one of the last texts: “Man is absolutely not the crown of creation: every creature stands beside him at the same stage of perfection” (Nietzsche 1990: 36).⁶ With this longing for another world, the earth itself is devalued: it becomes not our home, but the disposable earth, something to be used up and left behind — a wasteland. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra thus challenges humanity to overcome the life denying values of the past and become capable of remaining loyal or faithful to the earth and this life. The key to Zarathustra’s teaching would be this strange thought of *eternal recurrence*.

In an influential paper for environmental philosophy, the medieval historian Lynn White Jr. echoed Nietzsche's critique and generated considerable controversy when he stated that, regarding the ecological crisis, “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” (White 1967: 1206).⁷ He emphasized that "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen," and he traced the roots of the ecological crisis to the dualism of man and nature, and the teleological view that "it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (White 1967: 1205). White

went on to praise the "beatniks," who he calls "the basic revolutionaries of our time," because of "their affinity for Zen Buddhism, which conceives the man-nature relationship as very nearly the mirror image of the Christian view" (White 1967: 1206).

Saijo's affinity for Zen and haiku easily resonated with the beat writers in San Francisco. His familiarity with Buddhism and haiku came from his mother, a writer noted for both haiku and for her regular appearing columns in Japanese newspapers in Los Angeles.⁸ In *OUTSPEAKS* Saijo recalls one of his earliest memories of his mother scribbling away at her desk in the predawn hours. He goes on to explain that his interest in Zen developed after a chance meeting with Zen monk Nyogen Senzaki in the 40s. The Rinzai monk was one of the leading teachers of Zen on the West Coast at the time. Saijo expresses his deep gratitude to Senzaki: "FOR OPENING THE QUESTION OF THE GREAT MATTER TO ME" (Saijo 1997: 194). He goes on to say that it was another chance encounter that introduced him to the beats after moving to San Francisco in the late 50s.

Philosophy and Poetry

Another influence would be Walt Whitman. Of course, the 'father of American poetry' would influence just about all the poets down the line, but Whitman's free verse style, attention to the natural world, and joyous exaltation in the commonest things, would be especially influential on the poetry of the beats a hundred years after the original publication of *Leaves of Grass*. One might say that Whitman had already come to that view which White describes as the mirror image of the Christian view found in Zen concerning the relationship between human beings and the natural world. Thich Nhat Hanh suggests so much when he cites the famous line in *Leaves of Grass*: "I believe a blade of grass is no less than the journeywork of the stars," suggesting that it might be called a meditation on "interbeing endlessly interwoven," his phrase for the central Buddhist teaching that all phenomena are interdependent (Nhat Hanh 1996: 164).⁹ There has been considerable discussion about the structure of the long famous opening poem of *Leaves of Grass*, later titled "Song of Myself," but it has been suggested that the structure is a musical progression — a rhapsody.¹⁰

Saijo's *OUTSPEAKS* opens with a brief invocation, calling upon the muse, that "HEART TO HEART TRANSMITTER" as he puts it, to tell him the universe (Saijo 1997: 13). In the next

poem, "FIELD PREACHER," as in the opening verse to Whitman's "Song of Myself," the poet introduces himself:

I WANT TO BE A WITNESS – I WANT TO TELL WHAT I FEEL WHEN I SEE WHATS HAPPENING BEFORE MY EYES – I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE WHAT I SEE HAPPENING BEFORE MY EYES (Saijo 1997: 17).

He goes on to say he wants to be a field preacher like John Muir's father:

I WANT TO STAND UNDER AN OPEN SKY IN A FIELD & I WANT TO EXHORT & LAMENT ORACULATE ENTHUSE INVEIGH SCOLD RAIL STORM & RAGE RAGE ON WAIL & BEWAIL ELEGIZE & LYRICIZE (Saijo 1997: 17).

He continues on for a while and then exclaims:

I WANT TO RHAPSODIZE (Saijo 1997: 17).

In the next poem, "ANIMAL RHAPSODE" he investigates the meaning of "rhapsody" finding the OED definition fitting his style perfectly:

AN EXULTED OR EXAGGERATEDLY ENTHUSIASTIC EXPRESSION OF SENTIMENT & FEELING – AN EFFUSION MARKED BY EXTRAVAGANCE OF IDEAS & EXPRESSION BUT WITHOUT CONNECTED THOT OR SOUND ARGUMENT (Saijo 1997: 18)

Other definitions he finds fitting as well:

THE STRINGING TOGETHER OF POEMS – A MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTION – A CONFUSED MASS OF THINGS – A STRING OF WORDS SENTENCES TALES ETC – A LITERARY WORK CONSISTING OF MISCELLANEOUS OR DISCONNECTED PIECES – A WRITTEN COMPOSITION HAVING NO FIXED FORM OR PLAN (Saijo 1997: 18)

He notes the etymology of "rhapsode" is a compound of the words "to stitch" & "song." He explains the rhapsodes of ancient Greece were indigent persons who went around reciting Homeric poetry; and he notes that he is also indigent, but his text is not Homer's, but rather, the world he lives in. He concludes:

I WANT TO RHAPSODIZE – BUT I WOULD NOT BE PUT INTO ANY LITERARY CATEGORY – I CAN HONESTLY SAY I HAVE NO LITERARY CONCERN – I AM AN ANIMAL IN A CAGE & I AM BARKING TO BE LET OUT – AS IT HAPPENS MY BARK IS RHAPSODIC (Saijo 1997: 19).

Saijo, of course, experienced what it is like to be an animal in a cage when he and his family, like so many Japanese Americans, were imprisoned in an internment camp after Pearl Harbor.

In declaring himself a rhapsode, Saijo declares his allegiance in the quarrel, already ancient according to Plato, between philosophy and poetry. As we know, in the *Ion*, Socrates criticized the rhapsode for speaking from inspiration rather than knowledge. The poets, Socrates says, “are inspired and possessed” and “not in their right mind when they are composing their beautiful strains” (Plato 1892a, 502).¹¹ Nietzsche, too, one could say, sided with the poets in the ancient quarrel, though, to be sure, it is a long, complicated story, as Nietzsche’s thought involves more than a reversal of the opposition between poetry and philosophy, art and truth. But the decisive turn in his thought is the allegiance to the poets and to art in the ancient quarrel. In *The Birth of Tragedy* and other early writings, the high point of Greek culture is not the philosophy of Socrates and Plato, but rather Greek tragedy, especially the tragic poets, Aeschylus and Sophocles. Although the mature thinker would criticize the youthful Romanticism of his first book, he would never abandon the emphasis on art. Whereas for Plato, artists are asleep in the dreamworld playing with fictions, while philosophers have the serious task of awakening from the dream to the truth of reality as it is in itself, Nietzsche suggests philosophers have always been artists without realizing it, like dreamers who don’t realize they’re dreaming, naively thinking that they’re awake. Nietzsche’s philosophers of the future will be like lucid dreamers, aware that they are artists, that the world that concerns us is a fiction, as all knowledge involves active interpretation from limited perspective points of view.

Much of his later writings, various collections of aphorisms loosely stitched together in books, would fit the description of rhapsody as a “work consisting of miscellaneous or disconnected pieces.” In his own critique of *The Birth of Tragedy*, written in Sils-Maria in August of 1886, after both *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and *Beyond Good and Evil* had been published, he explains that his first work was “an impossible book” and that was because he had set out to answer the Socratic question regarding tragedy, attempting to tell the truth about art, when the story turned on the opposition of art and truth. In this critique, Nietzsche explains that he should have shaken off the scholar’s hood and sung rather than spoken (Nietzsche 1967: 20).¹² Of course, *Zarathustra* is a narrative telling of the hero’s journeys and his speeches. Most of the sections end with “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” except notably several crucial passages which end “Thus sang Zarathustra.” “The Night-Song,” for example, expresses the anguish of

love through the imagery of the sun in its solitude longing for the night and the company of shining stars. In his autobiography, *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche explains that “*Zarathustra* as a whole may perhaps be counted as music — certainly a rebirth of the art of *listening* was a prerequisite for it” (Nietzsche 2007, 65).¹³ Perhaps there is a sense in which *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* may also be counted as a rhapsody.

Zensational Rhapsody

In Saijo’s rhapsodic bark the poet rails against the madness of our modern civilization. In the poem “I MUST BE AN APOSTATE FROM HUMAN” he writes:

I BELIEVE THE HUMAN RACE INDIVIDUALLY & IN THE AGGREGATE IS A RACE
GONE TOTALLY PSYCHOTIC (Saijo 1997: 122).

He goes on to explain that civilization is the leading symptom of this madness. In the poem “naturmart” he pretty much puts his finger on the problem, calling attention to the “monstrous instance of pathetic fallacy” of anthropomorphizing earth, treating everything as a mere resource:

HOW VERY PRESUMPTUOUS OF US TO RESIGN UNILATERALLY FROM THE REST OF
NATURE & MAKE EARTH SUN STARS ATMOSPHERE NEAR & DEEP SPACE INTO ONE
BIG NATURAL RESOURCE CALLING FOR EARLY DEVELOPMENT IN HOMO SAPIENS’
BEHALF SOLEY (Saijo 1997: 122).

The obvious mistake in this fallacy is missing how all things are “interbeing endlessly interwoven,” that central teaching of Buddhism, repeated at the beginning of Mahayana Buddhism in *The Heart Sutra*, and again in the origins of Zen in Hui Neng’s famous line from *The Platform Sutra* which Saijo recalls here for us: “SINCE ALL IS VOID WHERE CAN THE DUST ALIGHT” (Saijo 1997: 44).

In a long poem on the Gulf War, the first one, Saijo rages against the destruction raining down on Mesopotamia. The poet takes us back and forth between the atrocity taking place on the other side of the world and the day as it unfolds in Hawai’i. He comes to a brutally harsh conclusion: “WE ARE A DESERVEDLY ENDANGERED SPECIES BOUND FOR EXTINCTION” (Saijo 1997: 80). The poem continues in a reflection on War & Peace, subtitled “A GITA UPDATE IN RHAPSODIC STYLE,” in which he calls attention, not only to the consequences for Iraqi civilians, but also on the environment:

NATURE GETS NO RESPECT FROM HOMO SAPIENS WHEN IT COMES TO ALL OUT WAR – ARMIES DON'T HAVE TO WRITE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENTS BEFORE THEIR WARS – IF THEY DID THERE WOULD NOT BE WARS – NATURE COMES BACK BUT WE TORE UP IRAQ SOMETHING SPECIDIAL US AND SADDAM – HERE LET US GIVE A SHORT WAIL FOR THE GONE BIOME OF MESOPOTAMIA & FOR THE GONE WATERS OF THE PERSIAN GULF (Saijo 1997: 86).

A little farther down he recalls the horrors of Hiroshima. Most Americans are not quite able to even consider whether the atomic bombings were really necessary and justified as their education never prepared them for asking such questions. Some consider it naive to even think about the problem of justice in war; but it sure sets a bad example for others to follow if the most powerful nation on earth ignores this question of justice. For his part Saijo holds nothing back in speaking out against the insanity of nuclear war, recalling in the poem “science” the famous photo from Alamagordo of Oppenheimer and General Groves:

STANDING ON THE PARCHED & CRACKED EARTH AT GROUND ZERO – [...] HERE IS THE FORMAL WEDDING OF SCIENCE & THE MILITARY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX – THE DEADLIEST FORCE ON EARTH TODAY – LETS PULL THE PLUG ON THESE MOTHERFUCKERS (Saijo 1997: 51).

The poet also leaves us a kōan:

– WHAT IS A DEAD RAT'S ASS WORTH – (Saijo 1997: 51).

In the poem “ANALGESIA LAND OF PAIN FREE” Saijo describes our civilization as an expression of pain, a monument to pain. Here is Saijo's expression of the first noble truth:

IS THERE LIFE BEYOND PAIN – ARE WE READY FOR PAIN FREE – WE WILL CHANGE – WE ARE SO ATTACHED TO BEING PAINFULLY SICK & SAD – WE ARE SO CAREFUL TO BE SAFE FROM PAIN EVEN AS WE PAIN – WE FEAR PAIN & BUILD FORTRESSES AGAINST IT BUT PAIN ALWAYS MANAGES TO BREAK THROUGH EVERY DEFENSE & MAKE US HURT – WE GET NO RESPECT FROM NATURE PAINWISE – PAIN HAS BEEN OUR CONSTANT COMPANION SINCE BIRTH – I HURT THEREFORE I AM (Saijo 1997: 26).

At the outset of the poem he proposes a “CRASH PROGRAM TO RELIEVE HUMAN SOCIETY FROM ALL PAIN BY THE YEAR 2000.” Well, it sure hasn't happened yet, not in the 2500 years or so since the Buddha first proposed such a program. But in another poem Saijo gets right to the core of the problem, elucidating both the cause and the cure, the 2nd and 3rd noble truths:

I LOOK AROUND & SEE THE MACHINE EATING UP EVERYTHING – I SEE IT HAS MADE EARTH INTO AN INDUSTRIAL SITE & WASTE DUMP – MACHINE IS DEFINITELY ON A LONG ROLL WORLDWIDE – BUT MACHINE HAS A FLAW – HARD

AS IT IS IT IS BUILT ON SOMETHING NONMECHANICAL & SOFT FROM THE
INVISIBLE REALM – DESIRE – TURN OFF DESIRE & MACHINE COLLAPSES (Saijo
1997: 63-64).

The machine of our industrial civilization is surely turning earth into a wasteland, and we also now know that it is the primary cause of climate change. In a poem titled “LIFE DIES IN A GREENHOUSE” from an unpublished collection, Saijo laments the coming catastrophe of climate change, and the resulting mass extinction that renders earth a near lifeless place:

UNDER CAP OF FOSSIL FUEL CARBON DIOXIDE EARTH GETS HOT – OCEANS WARM
& EXPAND – ICE MELTS – STORMS GROW MORE FIERCE & ACID [...] LIFE GETS
SICK WORLDWIDE – FAR INLAND HEAT WAVES & DROUGHT – SALT LAKES GET
SALTIER – DESERTS GROW – NO RELIEF – CLIMATE SHUDDERS – LIFE CHOKES IN
OZONE SINK WITH ONLY ANAEROBIC MICROBES SURVIVING – EARTH BACK TO
THEM AND ROCK WATER AIR WIND FIRE ICE (Saijo 2005).¹⁴

The tragic consequences of the rising temperature on earth in devastating heat, drought, fires, storms, floods, and rising waters, is making it obvious by now that climate change is real; and since the scientific evidence is so strong that the primary cause is the burning of fossil fuels, it should also be clear that our civilization has to change. More are at least beginning to become aware of this; but still far too few seem to understand what must change. Many still think that advances in technology will save the day; but despite all that has been said and done so far, carbon emissions keep climbing year by year; and thus it seems that a more profound change in our civilization is necessary.

In the poem “A KONA,” written on a day of kona winds and earthquakes, Saijo makes this point in drawing a lesson from a far flying kōlea. Just as he is writing about missing this “MARVELOUS BIRD OF PASSAGE” and earthquake happens and he notes:

A KONA DAY LIKE THIS JUST THE KINDA DAY EARTHQUAKES LIKE TO HAPPEN –
KONA DAYS ARE FULL OF PORTENT MAKING YOU FEEL LESS SELF-WILLED &
MORE FATED (Saijo 1997: 143).

Then he draws the lesson from the kōlea:

SOME KIND OF ANIMAL CIVILITY HERE – SOME KIND OF POLITIC FOR BEING
TOGETHER AND ALONE – HUMANS GOTTA CHANGE THE WAY THEY ARE IN
NATURE [...] (Saijo 1997: 143).

That's the bottom line, of course, we do have to change the way we are in nature; but what is it about our civilization, our way of being in nature, that must change? Saijo calls attention to that monstrous pathetic fallacy of treating the earth and every other living thing as a mere

resource for our consumption, and he exhorts us to turn off the desire that is fueling the machine of our industrial civilization and turning the earth into a wasteland. But, of course, all living things have desire and use the earth as a resource for life. So what is it about humans that is different from the rest of nature? What is this animal civility Saijo refers to that we might learn from the kōlea? Of course, one might say that the most obvious difference about the human way of being in nature, is the tremendous success human ingenuity and technology has achieved in rendering nature a resource to satisfy the most exorbitant desire. This success may be our downfall, however, as the need for resources to satisfy this desire leads to global conflict and ecological catastrophe. How can we even begin to change the way we are in nature when wealth is still considered the measure of success and ‘freedom’ means nothing more than the license to get as rich as possible?

This point gets to the issue of how language frames our way of being in nature, and Saijo explores this problem in another poem:

LANGUAGE IS A BODY OF SUFFERING & WHEN YOU TAKE UP LANGUAGE YOU
TAKE UP THE SUFFERING TOO [...] LANGUAGE MAKES US INTO EVERY MEANING IT
EXPRESSES SO WE ARE EVERYTHING WE CAN SAY & THIS IS HEAVY – THAT
SOMETHING SO OBVIOUSLY ABSTRACT SERIAL & RELATIVE CAN BE SO
POWERFUL MAKES YOU WONDER (Saijo 1997: 70).

He goes on to reference the famous opening line of the *Daodejing*, which raises the question of how can one say anything at all about the *Dao* if the *Dao* cannot be captured in words. In another poem on the *Heart Sutra* he ponders on the paradox:

IF FORM IS EMPTY AND EMPTY FORM – IF THEY ARE ONE & THE SAME – WHY
DOES IT TAKE 2 WORDS IN A PARADOXIC STATEMENT TO EXPRESS IT – 2 WORDS
THAT IN PLAIN LANGUAGE ARE CONTRADICTORY (Saijo 1997: 157).

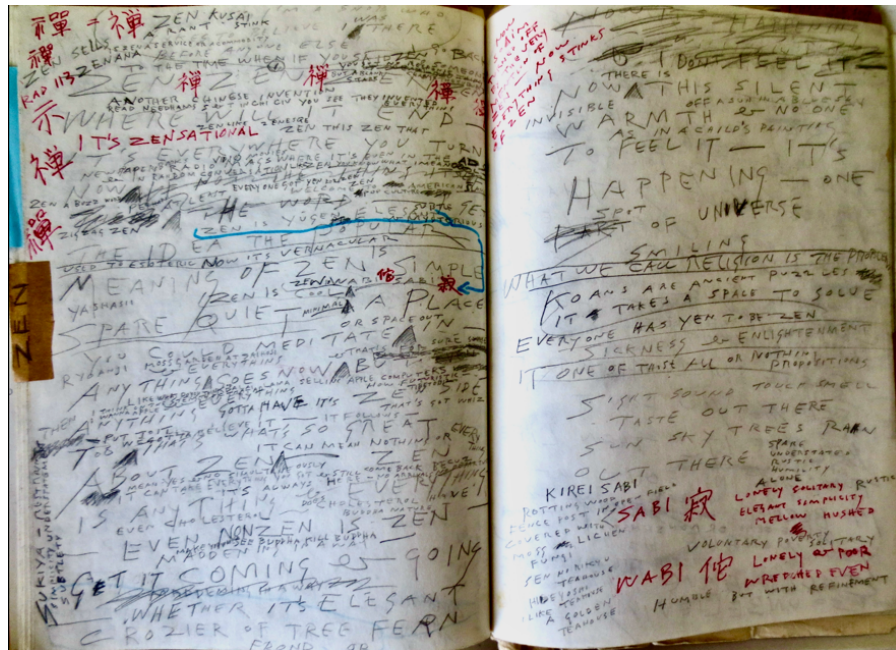
He goes on to suggest two reasons for the paradoxical line of the sutra: because life is a paradox and full of irony, and also because:

THERE IS NO OTHER WAY TO SAY IT THAT EXPRESSES THE DEEP PATHOS OF
SPIRIT CARNATE (Saijo 1997: 157-58).

I have been fortunate to be able to peruse some of Albert’s notebooks, which are like a palimpsest, with layers upon layers of pencil scribbling. I found a remarkable couple of pages with some interesting ruminations on Zen. One could spend a lot of time studying this palimpsest, trying to make out the poet’s thoughts. One thought in particular stands out and

draws my attention: “koans are ancient puzzles it takes a space to solve”. On the top level of the palimpsest in red ink we find characters for zen, and *wabi sabi*, and also a little playful pun on the part of the poet. One imagines him smiling as he writes in bold red ink:

IT'S ZENSATIONAL¹⁵



The Kōan of Eternal Recurrence

There is perhaps a connection between a rhapsody and a kōan. Socrates criticizes the rhapsode Ion for not having knowledge of what he recites as he cannot explain, give an account of what he speaks. With a kōan even if one did provide a sound argument to explain it, that wouldn't be enough to pass the test. Take the first kōan, Joshu's “Mu” for example:

A monk once asked Master Joshu, “Has a dog the Buddha nature or not?”
 Joshu said, “Mu!” (Shibayama 1974: 19)¹⁶

Even if one could explain that explain that *mu* (無) can serve not just as a negation, but also means ‘emptiness,’ — which, of course, is the wisdom of the *Heart Sutra*, the teaching that everything is empty of inherent or separate existence, and is thus the perfect response to the question whether a dog has Buddha Nature or not — it wouldn't be enough to pass the test. As the 13th century Chinese Zen Master Wumen (Japanese *Mumon*) had put it: “for the attainment

of incomparable satori, one has to cast away his discriminating mind” (Shibayama 1974: 19). For the point of the kōan is not intellectual understanding, but rather the experience of *satori*, that sudden enlightenment, profound transformation in the deepest depths below the surface consciousness of the discriminating mind. It is not enough to understand “Mu,” as Mumon explained, “one must *be* ‘Mu.’” It is not enough just to think about it, as Mumon had put it: “one must concentrate with your 360 bones and your 84,000 pores, making your whole body one great inquiry” (Shibayama 1974: 19). One wouldn’t pass the test until it is clear that the kōan has done its trick in becoming a catalyst for transformation.

If one takes that famous line from the *Heart Sutra* as a kōan, “form is emptiness, emptiness is form,” it would not be enough to explain that “form” is just the translation for Sanskrit *rūpa*, the “body,” the first of the five aggregates, and thus be able to explain how the line is not such a paradox at all as the body is the branch of the self in the Buddhist analysis most obviously empty of inherent existence.¹⁷ One would really have to get it—this wisdom of *śūnyatā*—all the way down in the deepest depths. But what about Saijo’s kōan, what is a dead rat’s ass worth anyway? I think this is probably a more difficult kōan, much more difficult for most of us. The simple merely intellectual explanation is the same for Joshu’s “Mu.” It is the same wisdom of the *Heart Sutra*: the bodhisattva Padmapāṇi, avatar of Avalokiteśvara, as depicted in the famous painting from the Ajanta caves, holds the lotus, symbol of enlightenment, out to all beings, including, of course, the rat. The wisdom of *śūnyatā* is supposed to lead to compassion for all sentient beings; but this is hard to really put into practice when it comes to rats. Perhaps it would take a space to solve this kōan, being in the space of a rat.

We know that music was a problem for Plato. It would be too dangerous for the guardians in the *Republic*. As Socrates explains to Glaucon, it “is a more potent instrument than any other,” and this is, as Socrates further explains “because rhythm and harmony find their way into the inward place of the soul” (Plato 1892b: 88).¹⁸ The rhapsodes are especially dangerous, Socrates explains to Ion, because they are not in their right minds when they sing their beautiful poems, but rather are “like Bacchic maidens who draw milk and honey from the rivers when they are under the influence of Dionysus” (Plato 1892a: 502). Perhaps the most important clue Nietzsche gives about *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is when he attaches the subtitle “*Incipit Tragoedia*” (the tragedy begins) to the opening lines of *Zarathustra* in the closing lines of Book IV of the *Joyous Science* (Nietzsche 2018: 221). Here he suggests that *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a tragedy. It

may not have the form of a tragedy, but its aim was what he thought was the highest aim of art, what he saw in Greek tragedy, in the Dionysian power of transfiguration—in the capacity of art to change us. The book would then not only be about the transfiguration, or overcoming of humanity, it would aim to bring this about and the thought of eternal recurrence would be the catalyst for this transformation. In the autobiography Nietzsche famously relates the story of when the thought of eternal recurrence came to him:



Now I shall relate the story of *Zarathustra*. The basic conception of the work—the *thought of eternal recurrence*, this highest attainable formula of affirmation—belongs to the August of 1881: it was dashed off on a sheet of paper with the caption ‘6000 feet above man and time’. On that day I was walking through the woods by Lake Silvaplana, not far from Surlei I stopped next to a massive block of stone that towered up in the shape of a pyramid. Then this thought came to me—(Nietzsche 2007: 65).

The kōan, if you will, would be what Nietzsche calls *the greatest weight*. “What if one day or night a demon came to you in your most solitary solitude and said to you: ‘This life, as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live again, and innumerable times again’” (Nietzsche 2018: 220-21). Nothing would seem to be worse than the fate of having to live this same life over and over again throughout eternity. Most surely would want things to be different, to change at least those loneliest moments. It is easy to see why the thought of eternal recurrence is so closely connected with the thought of *amor fati*, the love of fate, which Nietzsche expresses as a new year’s resolution, writing at the beginning of 1882, just a few short months after the thought of eternal recurrence came to him at the rock: “I want to come to regard everything necessary as beautiful—so that I will become one of those who makes everything beautiful. *Amor fati*: from now on, let that be my love! I do not want to wage war against the ugly. I do not want to accuse anyone, I do not even want to accuse the accusers. May *averting my eyes* be my only negation! All in all, and on the whole, some day I hope to be an affirmer” (Nietzsche 2018: 177).

Nietzsche’s resolution to accept everything necessary as beautiful echoes the acceptance of fate in the Stoics, and resonates with something similar in Zen, which may be traced back to Daoism, especially to the *Zhuangzi*. In that text, Zhuangzi tells stories about characters with

unusually powerful charismatic power (*de* 德) as a result of the way they have handled what has happened to them, their circumstance or fate (*ming* 命). My favorite is the humorous story of the ugliest man. He was ugly enough to astound the world, and yet everyone was drawn to him in an extraordinary way. He didn't have power to protect them, nor wealth to fill their bellies, but he had such powerful charisma because he didn't let the oscillations of fate upset the harmony of his spirit (*qi* 氣). This ability to “harmonize and delight” in the oscillations of fate and “never be at a loss for joy” enabled him to “make it be spring with everything” (Watson 1964: 70).¹⁹

Nietzsche's new year's resolution was to become just such a character,

The important 20th century Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani, a member of the Kyoto School, known for its attempts to engage Western thought in a dialogue with Zen, was one of the first to explore the relationship between Nietzsche's thought and Zen. Nishitani gave a series of lectures on Nietzsche in Japan in the late 40s. In the introduction to the translations of those lectures, in the volume *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, Graham Parkes explains that Nishitani's Zen standpoint brings into focus the core of Nietzsche's thought: “The idea of eternal recurrence in its connections with the notion of *amor fati*” (Parkes 1990, xxi).²⁰ In those lectures, Nishitani explains that it was “in such ideas as *amor fati* and the Dionysian as the overcoming of nihilism that Nietzsche came the closest to Buddhism, and especially to Mahāyāna” (Nishitani 1990, 180).²¹ In the later work, *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani explains that Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence is “one of the currents in Western thought to come closest to the Buddhist standpoint of *sūnyatā*” (Nishitani 1982: 215).²² He goes on to suggest that in the thought of eternal recurrence, “We seem to be breathing the same pure mountain air that we felt in approaching the standpoint of Dōgen,” and there he cites the line in which Dōgen, in his first lecture upon returning from China, expressed something like the thought of *amor fati*: “I now while away my time accepting whatever may come” (Nishitani 1982: 215). But Nishitani's final judgment in *Religion and Nothingness* is that Nietzsche's thought falls short of Zen, as Nietzsche's thought of eternal recurrence, he concludes, “does not make time to be truly time,” and thus “cannot signify the point where something truly new can take place” (Nishitani 1982: 215-216). Coming to this conclusion I wonder if he may have forgotten what he said in the earlier lectures on Nietzsche about what happens at the end of the passage in *Zarathustra* where the thought of eternal recurrence is expressed.

Zarathustra is at sea addressing the sailors on a ship when he shares the vision and the riddle. It is important to note that he addresses only those bold searchers, attempters and tempters, those who have, like Odysseus and his men, “embarked with cunning sails upon terrifying seas,” those whose souls are lured by sirens’ songs to founder in confounding depths (Nietzsche 2005: 134).²³ Alluding to another Greek myth, he tells the riddle only to those who “do not want to grope along a thread with cowardly hand”—those who are not like Theseus who, after killing the Minotaur, needed a thread to find his way out of the labyrinth. Zarathustra tells the vision and the riddle not to those landlubbers who need the solid ground of arguments, but those willing to explore unexplored seas, taking up the temptations of dangerous thought experiments, and not relying on the thread of Theseus, a sure line of reasoning, using the discriminating mind and its thread of sound argument to find one’s way through the labyrinth.

The vision unfolds as a dream sequence with scenes suddenly shifting disconnectedly. After trudging through a desolate landscape with a dwarf, the spirit of gravity, sitting on his shoulder pouring leaden thoughts into his ear, Zarathustra confronts the dwarf in the gateway of the moment, calling up from his depths the thought of eternal recurrence. The problem of suffering that leads to the longing for another world, is the problem of time and time’s passing—wishing to be somewhere else than the present moment. But the thought of eternal recurrence forces one to face this moment, as the moment comes back again and again. The scene shifts to Zarathustra alone in the most desolate moonlight, not sure whether he is awake or dreaming; there is a howling dog, and then that most horrible image—a young shepherd, writhing, convulsing, with a heavy black snake hanging out of his mouth. The snake is an obvious reference to the Ouroboros imagery, of a serpent biting its own tail, found in ancient Egypt and later in Gnosticism and alchemical texts, sometimes used as a symbol of the cyclical nature of time. In Zarathustra’s dream vision the shepherd is choked up, nauseated by the thought of eternal recurrence. Zarathustra then challenges the bold seafarers to guess the riddle and interpret the vision: The shepherd then finally heeds Zarathustra’s call and bites through the snake, the thought of eternal recurrence, and he jumps up: “No longer shepherd, no longer human—one transformed, illumined, who *laughed!*” (Nietzsche 2005: 138).

In *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, Nishitani calls attention to this laughter: “The most remarkable feature of Nietzsche’s ‘religion’ may be the sound of *laughter* that echoes through it” (Nishitani 1990: 66). He compares Nietzsche’s ‘religion’ with Zen Buddhism, which he notes,

“the history of which also reverberates with laughter of various kinds” (Nishitani 1990: 66). There is, of course, all sorts of laughter, expressing the whole range of human emotions. In Zarathustra’s riddle the one transformed laughs as no one has before. One might recall that Plato would ban, not only music and poetry, but also laughter, at least for the guardians, and thus, for the philosophers. As Socrates explains to Glaucon: “Neither ought our guardians to be given to laughter. For a fit of laughter which has been indulged to excess almost always produces a violent reaction” (Plato 1892b: 71). Persons of worth and especially the gods are thus not to be represented as overcome by laughter. Nietzsche’s response, stated toward the end of *Beyond Good and Evil*, is his proposal of “an order of rank among philosophers depending on the rank of their laughter—all the way up to those capable of *golden* laughter” (Nietzsche 1966: 232).²⁴ There is much to suggest that this golden laughter is that unprecedented laughter in Zarathustra’s riddle. The name “Zarathustra” (*Zoroaster* in Greek), after all, means “star of gold,” and the central image of the text is the shining of the golden sun. When the shepherd jumps up transformed, he is illumined, radiant like the sun, laughing that unprecedented golden laughter.

Then there is that last mad letter, perhaps the last thing he ever wrote, just a couple of days after he collapsed on the streets of Turin, where he explains that he is “condemned to while away the next eternity with bad jokes” (Hayman 1982: 335).²⁵ Though the letter clearly shows signs of the madness from which he would never recover, sometimes there is a fine line between lucidity and madness; and thus one may wonder whether there might be a sense in which the thought of eternal recurrence is something of a joke. To be sure, Nietzsche expresses the thought of eternal recurrence in the most exulted, rhapsodic way, emphasizing its transfiguring power in enabling humanity to become capable of remaining loyal to the earth. But it would surely be a mistake to take the thought too seriously, to think that Nietzsche really intended it to be taken as revealing the “true world,” a truth about how time really works, or what really happens after death. So perhaps it is a joke, part of Nietzsche’s deconstruction of the seriousness of philosophers naively believing they are awake when they are dreaming. Like a *kōan*, the thought of eternal recurrence is just a thought experiment or riddle that can be a catalyst for transformation, changing the way one faces each moment, and lives this life on earth. Thus, when Nishitani claims that Nietzsche’s thought falls short of Zen and the standpoint of *sūnyatā* because the eternal recurrence doesn’t allow time to be truly time, and cannot allow for anything new to happen, has he, at least there, at that point in that text, along with others who dismiss the thought of eternal recurrence for

similar reasons, perhaps thought it through too much, relying on the thread of discursive thought to make it through the labyrinth, and thus ending up in the logical absurdity of eternal recurrence? Has such a reading missed the joke and the importance of laughter? Zarathustra's riddle is the kōan of eternal recurrence; but just as every kōan has a catch or a trap, perhaps one doesn't pass the kōan of eternal recurrence if one doesn't get the joke. This, anyway, is an attempt to explain the kōan of eternal recurrence, which, of course, would never be enough to pass the test.

Golden Laughter

So what is this *golden* laughter that breaks out after getting the joke? At the end of the First Part of the text, Zarathustra connects gold with the highest virtue: "Only as an allegory of the highest virtue did gold assume the highest value" (Nietzsche 2005: 65). This highest virtue, Zarathustra goes on to explain, is the gift-giving love. Zarathustra's *Übermensch* would be one whose love shines like the sun that always gives its light, having overcome the anguish in "The Night-Song," giving its light without asking for a return on an investment. It is with this gift-giving love that Zarathustra calls forth human beings to become loyal to the earth. The golden laughter would then seem to be a laughter connected with this gift-giving love. It would be the laughter without *ressentiment*, a laughter that springs forth from *amor fati*, that profound acceptance that enables one to make it be spring with everything. The book opens and closes with Zarathustra's address to the morning sun; and the closing line of the book suggests Zarathustra has overcome the longing to be somewhere else and become capable of this golden shining as he leaves the solitude of his cave, "glowing and strong, like a morning sun coming out of dark mountains" (Nietzsche 2005: 287).

The wisdom of the *Heart Sutra*, seeing how everything is "interbeing endlessly interwoven," leads to the compassion of the bodhisattva vow. Instead of longing for liberation from this world and the round of rebirth, the bodhisattva vows to return to this life again and again in order to help all beings, including, of course, even the rats. To be capable of the bodhisattva vow would certainly be a different way of being in nature. Perhaps Graham Parkes is right when he suggests that Zarathustra's "bestowing love" as he puts it, resonates with the "abundant generosity" of the bodhisattva (Parkes 2000: 183)²⁶, and opens up "the possibility of a radically new way of being for the human" which is "profoundly relevant for ecological thinking" (Parkes 2005: 81).²⁷ If

such a transformation of human being were possible, the whole psychosis of our modern civilization driven by the madness of the wealth-producing machine that is leading global conflict and environmental catastrophe would simply fall away like leaves from a tree in autumn. But, of course, it might already be too late. Sometimes it feels like we are on board the Titanic, and the ship is just too big to turn fast enough. But that is our fate to live in such a time. How shall we live when we see what is happening before our eyes? I shall have to close with another poem from Albert Saijo. Some think the poet is being cynical here.²⁸ I don't think so though.. I find here both *amor fati* and laughter. I think what we have here is a simply zensational rhapsody!

BODHISATTVA VOWS

BODHISATTVA VOWS TO BE THE LAST ONE OFF THE SINKING SHIP
— YOU SIGN UP & FIND OUT IT'S FOREVER — PASSENGER LIST
ENDLESS — SHIP NEVER EMPTIES — SHIP KEEP'S SINKING BUT
DOESN'T GO QUITE UNDER — ON BOARD ANGST PANIC &
DESPERATION HOLD SWAY — TURNS OUT BODHISATTVAHOOD IS A
FUCKING JOB LIKE ANY OTHER BUT DIFFERENT IN THAT THERE'S
NO GOLDEN YEARS OF RETIREMENT — YOU'RE SPENDING ALL
YOUR TIME & ENERGY GETTING OTHER PEOPLE OFF THE SINKING
SHIP INTO LIFEBOATS BOUND GAILY FOR NIRVANA WHILE THERE
YOU ARE SINKING — & OF COURSE YOU HAD TO GO & GIVE YOUR
LIFEJACKET AWAY — SO NOW LET US BE CHEERFUL AS WE SINK —
OUR SPIRIT EVER BUOYANT AS WE SINK (Saijo 1997, 127)

¹ Albert Saijo, *OUTSPEAKS: A RHAPSODY* (Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1997). 199.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2018), 182.

³ Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963), 39.

⁴ Jason Samenow and Kasha Patel, "It's 70 degrees warmer than normal in eastern Antarctica. Scientists are flabbergasted," *The Washington Post*, 18 March 2022.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/weather/2022/03/18/antarctica-heat-wave-climate-change/>

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), 3.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 136.

⁷ Lynn White Jr, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," *Science*, no. 155 (1967): 1202-1207.

⁸ See Patricia Wakida, "Language and Silence—The Poetry of Asano Miyata Saijo (1891-1966)," *Discover Nikkei*, 5 June 2013. <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/2013/6/5/asano-miyata-saijo/>

⁹ Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Sun My Heart," in *Engaged Buddhist Reader*, ed. Arnold Kotler, (Berkeley, California: Parallax Press, 1996), 162-170.

¹⁰ Malcom Cowley, "Introduction," in *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass, The First (1885) Edition* (New York: The Viking Press, 1959), xvi.

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- ¹¹ Plato, “The Ion,” in *The Dialogues of Plato*. Vol. 1. trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892a), 497-511.
- ¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 20.
- ¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: How to Become What You Are* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 65.
- ¹⁴ Albert Saijo, *PLENTY TIME FOR HAPPY NOW* (Unpublished manuscript, 2005, typescript).
- ¹⁵ Albert Saijo, (Unpublished notebooks).
- ¹⁶ Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1974), 19.
- ¹⁷ Donald Lopez Jr., *The Heart Sūtra Explained: Indian and Tibetan Commentaries* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 57.
- ¹⁸ Plato, “The Republic,” *The Dialogues of Plato*. Vol. 3. trans. Benjamin Jowett, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1892b), 1-338.
- ¹⁹ Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), 70.
- ²⁰ Graham Parkes, “Introduction,” in *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xxi.
- ²¹ Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 180.
- ²² Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (University of California Press, 1982), 215.
- ²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 134.
- ²⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 232.
- ²⁵ Ronald Hayman, *Nietzsche: A Critical Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 335.
- ²⁶ Graham Parkes, “Nature and the human ‘redivinized’: Mahāyāna Buddhist themes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*,” in *Nietzsche and the Divine*. eds. John Lippit and Jim Urpeth (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), 181–199.
- ²⁷ Graham Parkes, “Nietzsche’s Environmental Philosophy: A Trans-European Perspective,” *Environmental Ethics* 27.1 (2005): 77–91.
- ²⁸ See Michael Masatsugu, “Haiku on the Road: Albert Saijo's Contested Historical Legacy,” *Amerasia Journal* 39.3 (2013), 57-82).