

Writing on Water

An Interview with John Cage

Spring 1991

Alan K. Anderson: How did you get interested in Buddhism?

John Cage: My interest in Zen came about through reading a book called *The Perennial Philosophy*, by Aldous Huxley, which was a collection of remarks of different individuals in different cultures at different times. They all seemed to be pointing in the same direction but they all had different flavors, and the flavor I preferred was that of Zen Buddhism.

AKA: Why was that?

JC: It was uncompromising and it had certain aspects of humor. It was not possible to understand it. You couldn't go step by step to an understanding of it. [laughs] I liked all of that. More recently in the last two or three years, I've been introduced to a kind of Tibetan teaching called Dzogchen. I could show you one of the texts. It begins with three things. The first one is 'the limitlessness of creation'; the second one, the right action is like 'writing on water'; and the third one is 'meditation is non-meditation'.

AKA: Yes, you wrote to me and said that you were practicing non-meditation. Actually, non-meditation is...

JC: Meditation! [laughter] I think now, particularly, the idea of the limitlessness or expansiveness of creation is very close to the effects of modern technology, which otherwise could be very confusing.

AKA: Why?

JC: In regard to how to make a choice. Since I work with chance operations so that I don't use emotions or thoughts about what is good and bad, I find a way---not of expressing my self in my work---but of changing my self through my work. Chance operations enable me to find one step within a vast number of possible steps to take in work, which I accept immediately without question. If I don't like it, I ask myself why I don't...and shortly thereafter, I do like it and I've changed!

AKA: Is there a relationship between decision-making and Dzogchen practice?

JC: Well, what better way to describe chance operations than 'writing on water'? [laughs] It all goes together. We have so many things to do nowadays. We are closer to one another than we ever have been. At the same time we don't write letters to each other; we telephone and fax. So to get through the circumstances of daily living with equanimity, which seems to be the center of all religious practices--instead of sitting cross-legged or whatever they do in Tibet [laughs], you can simply answer the telephone

and see how that strikes you. If it strikes you in a way that disturbs you, then you're not behaving properly. Curiously, once D.T. Suzuki said to all of us, "I can see how you could do this living in the country, but I don't see how you could do it in the city ." He didn't say what it was. That was exactly the problem I was working on: How can you do that ...in the city...in the noisiest place. So, in hearing that the worst place on earth---in terms of overpopulation, pollution, and so forth---was Calcutta, I've always thought of that as a kind of mecca; to go to that spot and see what one's attitude there is.

AKA: How did Suzuki's teaching affect your approach to art?

JC: He never seemed to be teaching any particular thing. He would come into the room carrying his books and greet us all, smiling at each person. Then he would sit down and re-greet us and unwrap his books. It was as though he were looking for something to say. He'd look at the books and say something that made little sense, and put the book aside; or he would go through all the books and find nothing and if he did say something he said something I couldn't remember. On other occasions he would say something I couldn't forget. We never knew what to expect.

AKA: How did his teachings affect your work?

JC: It meant I could work purposelessly; just as he was lecturing. By the way, a dear friend of mine told me that when she was much younger, a teacher came from Tibet and he spoke perfect English. She complimented him on his English and he said he just learned it as he crossed the ocean. She said, "How is it possible that you speak so well with so little experience with the language?" His answer was that he put his mind at the point where the English language was. Is that true? Have you heard of such things?

AKA: I've heard of some miraculous things, but I've seen only one. When I went to Trungpa Rinpoche's cremation I saw the traditional rainbow display during the cremation. It was a clear, hot day---nothing more than an occasional cloud in the sky. All of a sudden, there was a parade of approximately five different rainbows, the last one being a full circle around the sun.

JC: Good Heavens!

AKA: I have photos of it all.

JC: Then it's true!

AKA: Well, there's some notion there that the energy inside oneself is directly connected to what is outside.

JC: And it's all in the mind?

AKA: Yes.

JC: And it's not necessarily connected to the wall? [laughs]

AKA: Maybe it penetrates the wall! [laughter]

JC: Have you connected this to McLuhan's teachings? The idea that through technology, we have extended the central nervous system? It's marvelous!

AKA: Yes; the idea that there is really no `inside' and no `outside': it is really a web.

Do you feel that your music and your personal philosophy are understood by your listening audience?

JC: Oh, I don't know about the listening in the audience! [laughter] There's no way for me to know. I know only what I do myself.

AKA: Even though you can't manipulate the audience's response, you do give lectures and philosophize on what your music is about which encourages a certain way to relate to it.

JC: Yes, and the music itself does that too, I think, but you never can tell what some head is going to be thinking or feeling. Don't you think that each thinking must take place not only in one's head, but also in the listener's head? Forgive me, but I don't believe in education.

AKA: That's what I'm getting to. How did you know? [laughter]

JC: I'm afraid of education now. It's the same fear I have of government, because I think the two are very much in cahoots---along with the law, which is wrong. The law is clearly wrong because it makes decisions in favor of the rich, and it doesn't like poverty. And curiously, it's on the opposite side of the fence from all these teachings which are on the side of poverty, if we can talk in those terms. That's why I was already given to the acceptance of noise in terms of silence. So, regardless of how noisy the traffic is, it doesn't disturb the silence.

I've been asked to work with children and their teachers in the field of music, in France. And I don't teach; it's not my practice, so how can I do it? The secret is that I have to find a way not to teach, and find out what they can know.

AKA: One thing that I feel is very wrong with the educational system is that students aren't taught about their own learning processes---their own psychology. We don't give them the keys to their own minds, senses, and cognition. In your writings you advocate the importance of paying attention, being in accord with the way things are, and one's quality of participation---all of which stem from self-discipline as opposed to externally

applied discipline. I'm very interested in what techniques can be derived from meditation practice that could help students in their own cognitive development.

Would you give your definition of "discipline"?

JC: Giving up one's self...and following what you believe. The trouble is that what leads you to do what you do, is this, that or the other, and very rarely is it nothing---which it should be.

AKA: That's one thing that people haven't been instructed in. That wisdom is largely unavailable.

JC: And it's not in the schools. The situation is very spiritually impoverished, but there are many people now---and this discussion is an example of it---who are not impoverished.

AKA: I heard a story that you once were displeased with a musician's performance at a concert and told him that he needed discipline.

JC: I don't recall that.

AKA: Well, you told me earlier of a similar situation with some musicians that occurred at a recent concert. What did you do at that time?

JC: I gave them each \$250. [laughter]

AKA: You don't think that attentiveness is necessary in every situation?

JC: There is something that you always should do? We have a German tendency to think that if we say one thing, it applies in all directions, whereas, I think an Indian attitude is that certain things apply in one direction and other things apply in another. We live in a more complex situation than German thought could ever have imagined. If I use chance operations, a person of German persuasion will say, "And is that how you cook?" One should do some things one way, and some things another. One should be, in fact, inconsistent. [laughter] I think it would be difficult doing these things in educating others. One person knowing another person is almost impossible.

AKA: I'm not so sure. The manner in which our neuroses, self-consciousness, and clinging arises, is similar for each of us.

JC: That's like writing on water; you really can't say anything about it because it is not visible. It has no shape. You can't tell that you've done anything. These benefits come from working non-intentionally. I can work without knowing what I'm doing, and the strange thing is that it's to my liking; and even stranger that it's to other people's liking too. That's very funny. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with what I know.

AKA: I have difficulty reconciling this with what I've learned through meditation practice. First of all, if you really believe that, then why bother to educate your audience as to what 'non-intention', or 'chance operations' mean? And secondly, if there was no commonality between our 'invisible' worlds, we might have an extremely bizarre situation here: I might ask a musical question, and you might respond by making me some eggs. That's not what I'm looking for. Instead, you know what's going on here, and you respond appropriately.

JC: Yes, we can say "Yes".

AKA: And that's as far as you'll go with it?

JC: No, I'll go wherever you like! [laughter]

AKA: I believe that we have gone quite far already. Thank you very much for your time.

JC: My pleasure.

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And more...

Regarding a particular Delcroix exercise:

JC: This project doesn't much come to my mind until each morning when I come to shave, it's the first thought that comes to my mind, and I don't know why.

AKA: Shaving is probably the first detailed thing that you do in the day. It's otherwise kind of loose until that point.

JC: When I was a child, we would go to a Protestant church in the neighborhood, and the pastor talked once about shaving and it made quite an impression on me. [laughter]

He spoke about the habitual nature of it. I don't do that, I change my place of beginning and so forth.

I'm under the impression that we're living in what Joyce called "HCE"---`Here comes everybody'---in a state of great overpopulation. The physical nature of that is almost as alarming as the disappearance of the ozone layer. How do you teach this?

AKA: There's an interesting thing McLuhan said about ignorance--- "Discovery comes from dialogue that starts with the sharing of ignorance."

JC: That's beautiful.

On dance and music:

JC: A dance teacher said to me, "I don't know whether this will work", and I said that the way it will work is if you pay no attention to it. [laughter]

AKA: I bet she liked that.

JC: They don't know how to do that. But they'll do that because they have to---the performance is scheduled. [laughter]

On High and Low Art:

AKA: Do you make a dictinction between "high" and "low" art?

JC: There's far less than there used to be. There once was a great difference. What has happened is a result of more people and more ideas. People who have an experience of jazz have also had an experience of the other, and they don't see much difference. The pleasures of high and low are the same, and if one has access to the pleasures of one of them, he can move gracefuuly to the pleasures of the other.