

Back on the Fire.

Gary Snyder

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Passage Through India: An Expanded and Illustrated Edition.

Gary Snyder

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Wearing the broad-brimmed hat of the West, symbolic of the forces that guard the Wilderness, which is the Natural State of the Dharma and the True Path of man on earth; all true paths lead through mountains— (—from “Smokey the Bear Sutra”)

Gary Snyder tells us the origins of “Smokey the Bear Sutra” in the essay of the same title collected in *A Place in Space* (1995): After returning from Japan to Turtle Island in December 1968, Snyder saw an announcement of the Sierra Club Wilderness Conference to be held February 1969. That motivated him to inform North America of the significance of Fudo Myoo in terms of inner/world peace. He sat down and the “sutra seemed to write itself” (29-30). He then handed out copies of the now-famous broadside to government officials, “Forest beatniks and conservation fanatics” (30). In “Regarding ‘Smokey the Bear Sutra’,” included in this new volume of essays on the cover of which the figure of Fudo Myoo appears, Snyder writes that “[n]ow it is time for the truth to come out” (123).

The “truth,” as those who have faithfully read Snyder over his 50 years of publishing will recognize, is knotty, involving not only Smokey as a bodhisattva who brings us all “a rich and complex teaching of Non-Dualism that [proclaims] the power and the truth of the Two Sides of Wildfire” (123), but also the mutually implicating elements of wilderness, bioregionalism, poetry, deep history, environmentalism, reinhabitation, and peace. Indeed, these are the main topics that have informed and continue to compel Snyder’s writing. *Back on the Fire*, then, presents us with the continuing concerns of Snyder’s life as well as ample models of thinking and acting clearly and compassionately about important events, people, and places. As he writes in “The Path to Matsuyama,” “I am still trying to learn from history and nature” (51).

The title of this new volume of essays, talks, forewords, and after-words also reveals the multilayered significance of fire. While Snyder reports that our relationship with fire is based less on forest vitality than economic concerns and ignorance of forest ecosystems, he points out that the times are indeed changing. “We are called now to a more complex moral attitude, where we see fire as an ally in the forest, even while recognizing its power to do damage” (15), he writes. On a deeper level, fire stands in for our relationship with entire ecosystems. Instead of

exploiting mountains and rivers for cynical short-term desires, Snyder suggests that we think of ecology—whose prefix signifies home—as “complexity in motion” (31). In order for complexity to be understood and responded to rather than merely reacted against, we must see and understand that nature as our *true nature* “is the ground of self, life, spirit, and art” (49).

Our relationship with watersheds and mountain ecosystems is an indicator of more encompassing relationships. Snyder observes that “a society that treats its natural surroundings in a harsh and exploitative way will do the same to ‘other’ people” (23). Such is the case not only with North American indigenous peoples but also so-called second and third world peoples. In his keynote talk given at the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment in Naha, Okinawa in March 2003, Snyder invokes the “ancient spiritual meaning of ceremony as good manners toward the whole world,” something missing in what the author calls “the New World Disorder” (21). Snyder’s concept for coming to know that one is native to one’s place is reinhabitation and then acting accordingly is a “bioregional practice . . . [that] is more sophisticated than some replay of the medieval village” (98). Instead of some naïve back to the land utopia or aesthetic appreciation and appropriation of style, a bioregional practice, Snyder argues, “calls us to be ecologically and culturally cosmopolitan, hip to the planet and weather zone of the whole world, as well as to those of cuisine and architecture” (98). Such comportment towards the whole earth is a ceremonial intentionality that might accomplish the task of winning hearts and minds—peace.

An ongoing aspect of Snyder’s work has been to understand the deeper relationship of language to the world. Instrumental in his education were key Chinese philosophical texts from the Daoist tradition: *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. In addition, Snyder recalls that “[w]hen I ran across Basho’s great instruction ‘To learn of the pine tree, go to the pine tree’, my path was set” (54). It was the Japanese form of the haiku, established by Basho as its own poetic form that was helpful not only in Snyder’s own cross-cultural poetics, but also in the twentieth century generally, especially among East and West coast Beat writers:

[T]he power of haiku poetry is not only from clear images, or vivid presentations of the moment, or transcendent insight into nature and the world, but in the marvelous creative play with language. Poetry always comes down to language—if the choice of words, the tricks of the syntax, are not exactly right, whatever virtues a piece of writing might have, it is not a poem (56).

It is not just that haiku has informed Snyder’s poetry, but that haiku is a sensitivity to nature that trains the eye and mind to notice “the seasonal signals” in any place in space (57). Thus, for Snyder, “East Asia teaches us all” (27).

Shoemaker & Hoard have reissued Snyder’s *Passage Through India*, a journal/memoir of his 1962 visit to India with Joanne Kyger [who has her own account of their travels in *Strange Big Moon: The Japan and India Journals 1960-1964* (North Atlantic Books 2000)]. Later in that

same trip they met Allen Ginsberg who recorded his travels with Peter Orlovsky in *India Journals* (Grove Press 1996). In this text to which Snyder has added more photographs “unpacked from back boxes in the barn and former chicken coop, pretty much still good,” we read of Snyder’s interest in Asia as a particular example of his interest in deep history, philosophy, religion, and environmentalism as well as his regard for ancient cultures weathering the storm of globalization (ix). In his 1983 preface, he wrote: “The culture that articulated (especially Jain and Buddhist religions) the most thoroughgoing philosophy of carefulness with life (*Ahimsa*, non-injury) is a land of ecological degradation and human difficulty” (xi). In the preface to the new edition, Snyder’s observation remains largely unchanged despite his many subsequent returns to the subcontinent:

I’ve been back a few times to Japan as well. I think a lot about both India and Japan. India anciently belongs with the Occident and the Middle East far more than East Asia. Main population Caucasoid, and at least half of the languages belonging to the same family as Gaelic: Indo-European. “Iran” a version of the word Aryan. Such intelligence, pride, and poverty—India is a developed world, but anciently developed in a different way. Today, its joining the new “developed world” is in some ways a decline. (ix)

Though in “decline,” India is still alive with the ancient voices that originated yogic practices and other meditative regimens, regimes of higher consciousness that may still teach us.

Rereading this memoir/ travel diary after so many years is still instructive in terms of both Snyder’s expansive erudition about the places he visits and the dialogic narrative he composes. Snyder combines poetry and philosophical insights with history, geography, ecology, and accounts of visits with extraordinary people such as the Dalai Lama. Of course, one finds the mundane details of traveling, but what continues to stand out to me is the precision and care with which Snyder treats his subject matter. It is more than mere matter, though. *Passage Through India* still teaches us that careful attentiveness to the culture of an “other” may yet yield for us the understanding leading to compassion.