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Buddhist Philosophy

Influences of Zen Buddhism on the Creative Processes and Life of John Cage

John Cage, primarily known as a composer who affected the course of music in the 20th century, has also made an enormous impact on art, literature, the performing arts, and aesthetic thought in general. In 1945, Cage was introduced to Zen Buddhism by Doctor Daisetz Suzuki at Columbia University. Though Cage had already merged Western and Eastern traditions in his early musical compositions, these lectures influenced him further East to the point in which he attempted to eliminate his ego through various creative processes. These processes and various works will be explored in relationship to Zen Buddhism, along with the reasons why Cage chose to embrace the philosophy of Zen Buddhism not only for his artistic expression but for his way of life.

In 1945, Cage was seeking resolutions to what he called "disturbances" in his personal life and his work. He was separating from his wife and embracing his relationship with Merce Cunningham, making himself susceptible to a homophobic society. He was also coming to the personal realization that communication in art was not possible for him: "I saw that all composers were writing in different ways, that almost no one among them, no one among the listeners could understand what I was doing in the way that I understood it. So that anything like communication was not possible . I determined to find other reasons [for composing], and I found those reasons because of my personal problems at the time, which brought about the divorce from Xenia." [1]

Since nothing was useful to him in the Western traditions– medicine, education, religion (the American Psychological Association did not remove homosexuality from its lists of pathologies until 1973), Cage turned to the East for help with his disturbances: "It was after 1945, between 1946 and 1947 I suppose, that I began to become seriously interested in the Orient. After studying Oriental thought as a whole, I took Suzuki's course for three years, up until 1951."[2]

Zen Buddhism, being theoretically attractive and emotionally satisfying to him, allowed Cage to resolve his disturbances: "You can feel an emotion; just don't think that it's so important… Take it in a way that you can let it drop! Don't belabor it!… And if we keep emotions and reinforce them, they can produce a critical situation in the world. Precisely that situation in which all of society is now entrapped."[3]

The Zen-inspired call to attentiveness to the present, coupled with its transparency to doctrinal or dogmatic claims allowed Cage to develop a new relationship to his disturbances. He called this new attitude "nobility": "To be 'noble' is to be detached, at every instant, from the fact of loving and hating. Many Zen stories illustrate that nobility."[4] Cage's anxiety and pain had metamorphosed into detachment..

This detachment paradoxically yielded engagement in the form of simple attentiveness to the world. "Detached engagement – what Cage referred to as simply "listening"[5] – served as a precursor to his anarchist convictions and led him to a new musical aesthetic or voice, aleatory music.

Aleatory refers to music or elements of a piece of music which are determined by chance. Its goal is not communication but simply listening – 'noble' (i.e. detached)

listening, free of intellect or emotion – detached engagement. Cage's music of the early fifties was less expressions of his ideas or tastes and more a product of aleatoric compositional processes in which 'meanings', if there were any, were chance products of the listeners' cognition.. This was a deliberate attempt of his to remove the ego.

In his quasi-aleatoric *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Chamber Orchestra* (1951), Cage created an interplay of western and eastern elements: "I made it into a drama between the piano, which remains romantic, expressive and the orchestra, which itself follows the principles of Oriental philosophy. And the third movement signifies the coming together of things which were opposed to one another in the first movement."[6]

The agent of that "coming together of things which were opposed" was silence. Recognizing that silence is coterminous with sound - silence exists as the ground from which sound springs and to which it ultimately returns – Cage developed a compositional strategy that favored coexistence instead of opposition. Silence preceeded and exceeded sound and by so doing, dissolved the binarism ('duality') of sound-silence into a form of continuity. This can be compared with the concept of non-duality in Buddhism.

Probably, aleatory music achieved its most crystalline form in Cage's composition entitled, *4'33"*, referred to as his "silent piece". Written in 1952, *4'33"* is his most notorious work, consisting of four minutes and thirty-three seconds in which the performers play nothing. His original concept was described as "a silent frame filled with non-intentional environmental sounds."[7] He described the first performance in terms of the three silent movements: the sound of the wind in the trees entered the 1st movement / during the 2nd movement, raindrops pattered on the roof / during the 3rd movement, the audience whispered and muttered.[8]

Later, Cage clarified that he did not regard the length of the movements in his silent piece as important: "It can be any length" he said "so that we can listen at any time to what there is to hear."[9]

Cage remarked that this was his most important piece and his favorite piece: "No day goes by without my making use of that piece in my life and in my work…I listen to it every day….More than anything, it is the source of my enjoyment in life."[10]

This approach to listening might be compared in Zen, to that of a haiku poet whose life is to become one with nature. A haiku is "the expression of a temporary enlightenment, in which we see into the life of things."[11] In Zen Buddhism, this enlightenment is referred to as satori. If Cage listened with the same awareness and sensitivity as a haiku poet experiences nature, one can understand why it became an important part of his life as well as his work.

Cage went on to say that everything about the silent piece is dispensable except the listener, suggesting possibly that his 'concepts' (musical score, timings, etc.) probably were created only to make the audience take it seriously. After all, concepts would be contradictory to an intuitive Zen experience. He described it as "music that attempts to express nothing and to communicate nothing and yet expresses and communicates everything."[12] This description has overtones of the doctrine of the Void (in late Buddhism): "In this Nothing, all things are equal, because infinite. In this Silence, all things speak..."[13]

Another step towards this aesthetic was taken with Cage's dictum that art and life should no longer be separate, but one and the same: "Art is not an escape from life, but rather an introduction to it."[14] This led to his concept of interpenetration: works that

welcome and include sounds outside of the composers and performers intentions are those that include interpenetration. In *4'33"*, he used chance as a form of interpenetration to free the composer from controlling sounds. Using chance was literally an imitation of nature's manner of operations. The "silence" allowed nature and life to become the art.

Cage linked interpenetration with "unimpededness" (from Zen Buddhism) to formulate his ideas of relations between sounds, human beings, and objects: "Now this unimpededness is seeing that in all of space each thing and each human being is at the center and futhermore that each one being at the center is the most honored one of all. Interpenetration means that each one of these most honored ones of all is moving out in all directions penetrating and being penetrated by every other one no matter what the time or what the space....In fact, each and everything in all of time and space is related to each and every other thing in all of time and space."[15] Cage was describing what Suzuki had said in regards to Oriental thinking. In Zen terms, this is the mystery of being-becoming and becoming-being....of self-identification and universal interpenetration or interfusion."[16] Everything is inter-connected.

In Cage's lectures and writings, he expressed his preference of conversation and dialogue to the notion of communication. He felt that communication presupposes that one has something, an object , to be communicated. In substituting "conversation" with "communication", Cage attempted to replace a desire for mastery or control with an open-ended free play of ideas. This parallels with Zen's intuitive character. In his "Lecture on Nothing", he described a detachment from ideas: "As we go along/(who knows)/ an idea may occur in this/ talk./I have no idea/ whether one will/ or not./ If one

does/ let it. Re/gard it as something/ seen / momentarily, / as / though / from a window /while traveling."[17]

In another written work entitled, John Cage Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse) didn't suggest that the world is as good as it can possibly be. He inferred that there are probably more bad strategies (i.e. actively opposing power through violence) than good ones in an attempt to accomplish this "improvement". He felt that what silence offered was the prospect of resisting the status quo without opposing it.[18] Believing that art had the potential power to change peoples thinking, Cage wanted his art to wake people up to the wonderful experience of life. Indeterminacy was another musical process that Cage developed during these years. His text-sound composition with the same name, *Indeterminacy* (1959) is one in which Cage reads short anecdotes while David Tudor provides electronic music accompaniment. The reading and the electronic effects are only related in as much as they are taking place at the same time in the same space. The relationship is determined by chance, and is one of interpenetration. It is quite different than improvisation in its attempt to once again eliminate the ego. Improvisation involves making choices that are determined by the performers' likes and dislikes.

A number of Cage's anecdotes in *Indeterminacy* are Zen related or influenced. For example, Cage speaks: "In Zen they say: If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, try it for eight, sixteen, thirty-two, and so on. Eventually one discovers that it's not boring at all but very interesting."[19]

With this story, Cage expresses the different sense of time between the East and the West. To a typical western mind, there is a sense of humor here. To a Zen mind, there is probably a simple sense of truth.

Cage started working with printmaking at Crown Point Press in 1978. He was drawn to this medium for the aesthetic choices he had made during his 'Suzuki Lecture' years. The printmaking medium doesn't allow the artist to have complete control over the results: the press creates amazing 'unpredictable outcomes' that can be seen possibly as a visual Unconscious. So Cage with his chance operations and a medium that also involves chance seemed to be an ideal match. And it was: Cage produced 667 individual works of art at almost yearly visits to Crown Point Press until his death in 1992. He worked with visual art in the same way he worked with music, using chance operations, involving tossing coins and using the I Ching to obtain numbers that would determine various structural and conceptual aspects of the art work. He said that by doing these chance operations , "you're basically shifting from the responsibility to choose to the responsibility to ask."[20] Cage never changed the outcome even if he wanted to. Instead he changed his own perception: "I don't change it. I change myself."[21] …once again, attempting to eliminate the ego.

The owner of Crown Point Press produced a book of Cage's art entitled, John Cage, Visual Art: To Sober and Quiet the Mind. The last part of this title describes what Cage believed the purpose of music and art to be. In 1946, Cage had asked an Indian music student what the purpose of music in India was. She replied that her teacher thought that the purpose of music was "to quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences."[22] Cage was profoundly struck by this reply to the point in which he

became determined to understand what was a "quiet mind" and what were" divine influences." This encounter along with his timely "disturbances" led to his immersion into the study of Zen Buddhism via D.T.Suzuki, which deeply affected the rest of his life.

Though Cage was obviously greatly inspired by concepts of Zen Buddhism, he never claimed or assumed to be an accurate reflection of them: "What I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen, I doubt whether I would have done what I have done…I mention this to free Zen of any responsibility for my actions. I shall continue making them however."[23] Probably there are a number of contradictions that can be pointed out in the various processes Cage used in an attempt to remain detached, lose his ego, and experience satori. The very fact that they are processes, intellectual conceptions, is a strong one. In any event, at the very least, he is an example of an artist , born in the West, embracing the East, specifically Zen Buddhism, and as a result, becoming a powerful force and influence in the arts and philosophy.

[1] Bernstein, David W. and Christopher Hatch, Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry And Art, The University Of Chicago Press, 2001, p.48.

[2] Cage, John, For The Birds, Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981, p.94.

[3] Ibid, p.56.

[4] Ibid, p.201.

[5] Bernstein, David W. and Christopher Hatch, Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry And Art, p.46

[6] Cage, John, For The Birds, Boston: Marion Boyars, 1981, p.41.

[7] Solomon, Larry J., "The Sounds Of Silence, John Cage and *4'33'*",
http://www.azstarnet.com/~solo/4min33se.htm, 1998.

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid

[10] Solomon, Larry J., "The Sounds Of Silence, John Cage and *4'33'*"

[11] Blyth, R.H., The History Of Haiku, Volume 1, The Hoku Seido Press, 1963, p. 270.

[12] Solomon, Larry J., "The Sounds Of Silence, John Cage and *4'33'*"
[13] Blyth, R.H., The History Of Haiku, Volume 1, The Hoku Seido Press, 1963, p. 16.

[14] Solomon, Larry J., "The Sounds Of Silence, John Cage and *4'33'*"

[15] Cage, John, Silence, Wesleyan University Press, 1973, pp. 46-47.

[16] Suzuki, Daisetz T., Zen And Japanese Culture, Princeton University Press, 3rd Printing, 1973, p. 265.

[17] 19 Cage, John, Silence, p. 110.

[18] Bernstein, David W.and Christopher Hatch, Writings Through John Cage's Music, Poetry And Art, p. 55.

[19] Cage, John, Indeterminacy, Smithsonian/Folkways Recordings, 1992, CD

[20] Brown, Kathan & John Cage, John Cage, Visual Art: To Sober And Quiet The Mind, Crown Point Press, 2000, p. 49.

[21] Ibid, p. 50.

[22] Solomon, Larry J., "The Sounds Of Silence, John Cage and *4'33'*"

[23] Cage, John, Silence, Forward xi.