

# Low Welch: Hermit Poet of Rat Flat

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## Introduction

In May of 1971, Low Welch disappeared into the woods surrounding Kitkitdizze, poet Gary Snyder's home, and into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. He had taken a gun and left a farewell note. Despite some supposed sightings and a prolonged search, his body was never found, and no trace of Welch has been seen since. The consensus at the time was that he had committed suicide on some high rock outcropping leaving his body for the vultures (his totem animal) to find.

Welch had suffered from lifelong depression and alcohol abuse. He seemed to have been given a last chance at putting his life together when Snyder and other members of the Bald Mountain Association agreed to allow him to build a cabin on land near Snyder's home. Welch had organized friends to help construct the cabin and had sent out requests for the loan of money to friends and family, receiving a positive response. He saw building this hermit's cabin as a last chance to put his life together without alcohol and went on Antabuse. Unfortunately, he periodically stopped the drug so he could continue to drink, according to Aram Saroyan in *Genesis Angels*, and this, coupled with the depressive aspect of Antabuse itself, could have led to suicidal tendencies (127).

Welch's mysterious and complete disappearance can be likened to that of the Chinese hermit poet, Han Shan, who lived in the T'ang Dynasty and whose poems Snyder had translated in the 1950s as *Cold Mountain Poems*. Han Shan lived near Kuo-Ching Temple where his sidekick Shih-te worked in the kitchen. A T'ang official heard

about and sought him out, but on confrontation, Han Shan and Shih-te ran away. The official then tried to send clothing and supplies, but at his messenger's approach, the two ran into a cave and were not seen again. Similarly to Han Shan, Lew Welch considered himself a hermit poet, living at Rat Flat in the Trinity Alps in a cabin he had found in the early 1960s. Welch had hoped to re-create this hermit existence the year he disappeared.

### Welch, the Beat Perspective, and Buddhist Inspiration

Welch's hermit persona is one aspect of his participation in the Beat avant-garde's interest in Asian culture and spirituality, especially Zen Buddhism. Similarly to other Beat writers, much of Welch's poetry was deeply spiritual with a political edge and an impetus to change society, strongly informed by a search for spiritual wisdom. I contend that this orientation was the guiding force behind much of Welch's work, which an examination of *Ring of Bone*, his spiritual autobiography, makes clear.<sup>1</sup> His understanding of Mahayana Buddhism, specifically Zen, deepened over time, culminating in the poems he wrote toward the end of his life after his return from the Trinity Alps.

Welch learned much about Zen Buddhism and was inspired to practice first through contact with Snyder and subsequently with Albert Saijo whom he met at Snyder's zendo, Marin-an, in Marin county outside of San Francisco in 1958-59.<sup>2</sup> Snyder had moved into a cabin on Locke McCorkle's property in February 1956, and in March he named it Marin-an, calling it a "bhikku-hostel" in a letter to Kerouac (quoted in Suiter 186). Returning from Japan in 1958, he re-established Marin-an, turning a room into a

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<sup>1</sup> This work will be hereafter referred to as *RoB*.

<sup>2</sup> Saijo had studied meditation with Zen teacher Nyogen Senzaki in Los Angeles.

zendo in September of that year with six regular sitters, Lew Welch among them (Suiter 241). In a letter to Philip Whalen in October 1958, Welch writes that Snyder “has us sitting in his shack Japanese style all the while ringing bells and smacking blocks of wood together. Then we run around the woods in pitch darkness . . . return, sit, drink tea, sit, and go home” (*I Remain I*, 149).<sup>3</sup> When Snyder left for Japan a second time in 1959, he left the zendo under the primary care of Saijo; subsequently, Welch took over for several months beginning in May of that year during Saijo’s absence.

However, Welch did not practice Zen formally or regularly thereafter, but in a somewhat idiosyncratic manner, as evidenced by a 1963 letter to Snyder from his hermit cabin in the Trinity Alps where he notes, “If you do set up a Zendo I won’t join. I eat meat & sit better all alone and wild” (*IR II* 99). During the two years he lived in the Trinity Alps, he practiced meditation in his own way, and began to think of himself as a hermit and Zen lunatic, evident in the title of *RoB*’s second book, “Hermit Poems.” Despite seemingly little time as a Buddhist practitioner and hermit, these experiences had a major effect on the direction Welch’s poetry took, especially in his spiritual autobiography, *Ring of Bone*.<sup>4</sup>

### *Ring of Bone* as Spiritual Autobiography

Donald Allen writes in the “Editor’s Note” for *Ring of Bone* that Welch “completed assembling” the collection in February 1970. It was accepted for publication, but at the time of Welch’s disappearance, had still not been published. Welch’s original

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<sup>3</sup> This two-volume collection of letters will hereafter be referred to as *IR*.

<sup>4</sup> Welch was also inspired by Jack Kerouac’s interest in Buddhism and read the Diamond Sutra on Kerouac’s recommendation.

plan for the volume was spelled out in its Preface where he explains that “this book is organized into a structure composed of individual poems, where the poems act somewhat like chapters in a novel. The poems are autobiographical lyrics and the way they are linked together tells a story.” *Ring of Bone* consists of five books with “principal characters . . . The Mountain, The City, and The Man who attempts to understand and live with them.” He clarifies this organization further stating that *RoB* “might be called a spiritual autobiography arranged in more or less chronological sequence. But this does not always mean that poems near the beginning were written first” (3). He also makes comparisons to other works such as Yeats’s *The Tower*, Baudelaire’s *Les Fleurs du Mal*, and Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

All of these are collections of lyrical poetry with an emphasis on the philosophical and spiritual. In addition, they are carefully ordered collections that rely on symbols, archetypes, and personae as poetic and connecting devices. The very title and organization of Welch’s collection, with its circular and symbolic image, also correlate to the Japanese *enso*. According to Zen teacher John Daido Looi, this “is perhaps the most common subject of Zen calligraphy. It symbolizes enlightenment, power, and the universe itself” (xi). He explains that the *enso* is a “circle painted with one brushstroke in a single breath,” and claims that *enso* paintings “act as visual and poetic koans” (xii). They are drawn to demonstrate moments of enlightenment and are often accompanied by calligraphed poems as in the case of Welch’s *enso* and poem, “Step Out onto the Planet,” included in book II, “Hermit Poems.” This same circle appears on the cover of *Ring of Bone*.

## Book I, “On Out,” “Wobbly Rock,” and The Americanization of Zen

The volume’s first book, “On Out,” begins in the city with emphasis on friends, work, and the self as poet. The speaker realizes in “Chicago” that the solution to the problem of the city is to “walk away from it.” Welch begins this walk away in a major early work of book I, “Wobbly Rock,” whose inception and inspiration may have come from Welch’s experiences in the Marin-an zendo, representing the understanding of Zen gained thereby. In a letter to Whalen, for example, Welch writes about meditation periods with possible allusion to the title: “The night before I really got balanced and rocklike” (*IR I* 150).

This poem of six parts also has a circularity about it, echoing the organization of *RoB*, itself, beginning and ending in the present with the poem’s speaker sitting on a rock on Muir Beach. The speaker free associates about this real and symbolic rock as his thoughts move across cultures and back and forth in time. Welch directly alludes to sitting and walking meditation in the first and last sections. As well, he references Buddhist concepts about the connectedness and interdependence of all creation, the Buddhist concept of *pratitya-samutpada* or conditioned arising, whereby all phenomena are interdependent and mutually condition each other. This concept is pictured as twelve links on the chain of being beginning with ignorance moving through consciousness, desire, birth, death, and rebirth to ignorance and suffering again. The cycle repeats unless broken. For example, in the fifth section, the speaker recounts a boat trip he took with friends in which, entering a small cove, he notes the levels of life from fish and kelp below, to the starfish lower on the cliff and flowers above, with finally a hawk in the sky, all connected through the vision of the poet.

Welch comments on “Wobbly Rock” in a letter of August 9, 1960, to Charles Olson, indicating a desire to go beyond it: “Am now working along the path started in WR – trying to set down the truth as I learned from Mahayana – but religiously straight (no reliance upon Jap. Forms, images, things). It must be made in terms strictly found in my part of this planet – to use yr. phrase, the ‘breathing’ must be ours” (*IR* II 5). This quote also indicates Welch’s affinity with other Beat writers who chose to put their own spin on Zen, a tendency Alan Watts terms Beat Zen in his 1958 essay “Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen.”

#### Going Beyond: Hermit Poems and Return to the Din

Welch would be able to move deeper into a Buddhist mind frame in “Hermit Poems” and “The Way Back,” books II and III of *RoB* written from his hermit’s cabin in the Trinity Alps where he enters into the actual experience of an American Buddhist hermit poet. These poems, written primarily in the first person in a lyrical and stanzaic form (Welch called them songs), progress through seasons to describe the speaker’s simple life and interaction with nature. The isolated life he would live there, getting “shack simple,” becoming a Zen lunatic, would burn away the consciously literary to let the accurate truthful voice of the hermit out on the page.

Book II, “Hermit Poems,” begins with a spring poem, “Preface to Hermit Poems, The Bath,” a poem in celebration of rebirth and Welch’s new life in the woods: “I think I’ll bathe in / Spring-rain tin-roof clatter of it / all begins to melt away. / The bath a ritual here, the way it used to be” (18-21). One of the most important poems of this section from a Buddhist perspective is “I Burn up the Deer in my Body” which describes the

speaker's interconnections with the world around him. Burning deer in his body and wood in his stove, he asks, "How can I be and never be an / inconvenience to others here / where only the Vulture is pure" (6-8). As the speaker kills and eats the deer, he enacts the round of birth, suffering, death, and rebirth; death gives life. This and other poems in book II express feelings of connection and interdependence with other beings, especially creatures of the natural world.

In book III, "The Way Back," the hermit prepares to leave his hut to return to the city, thus fulfilling the movement promised in Welch's preface. Importantly, Welch introduces the idea of the bodhisattva, the ideal of Mahayana Buddhism in which enlightened beings return to earth to lead others to enlightenment. The Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, makes an entrance in the first poem, along with a statement of the Bodhisattva ideal: "And They, the Blessed Ones, said to him, / 'Beautiful trip, Avalokiteshvara, / You never have to go back there again.' / And he said, 'Thank you very much, but I think I will, / Those people need all the help they can get'"(1-5).

In "He Thanks His Woodpile," he lovingly describes the "wood stews" he made all winter, comparing himself to Han Shan and others "who walked away from it, finally, / kicked the habit, finally, of Self, of / man-hooked Man" (17-19). The bodhisattva's return to help others parallels Welch's own return as he begins to let others know how the hermit life changed him, especially through his love for the planet and all beings.

The poems of the fourth book, "Din Poem, Courses," take place in the city where the speaker is sucked back into its din. However, once back, Welch's understanding of

Buddhism is expressed in a deepening of connection with other humans, leading to a political or sociological understanding of the bodhisattva ideal. A short poem from “Courses,” “Course College Grad Address” suggests this: “ (1) Freak out. / (2) Come back.” / (3) Bandage the wounded and feed / however many you can. / (4) Never cheat.” (1-5).

### The Problem of the Self: Mt. Tamalpais, Satori, and the Turkey Buzzard

Welch’s interest in kicking the “habit of Self,” as expressed in “He Thanks His Woodpile,” perhaps intensified by the city with its commodity culture, would be the project of the last book of *Ring of Bone*, “The Song Mt. Tamalpais Sings.” Welch had first broached this problem in book I with the poem, “Song of a Self.” This poem closes with a Commentary by the Red Monk (one of *RoB*’s personae): “. . . there is no suffering / unless we invent someone to suffer the suffering” (29-30). Welch here implies that the ego or self is illusory, as is the suffering of that self, one of the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha. For Welch the Bodhisattva ideal and compassion for others and oneself may be one way out of the problem of self as well as a way to change the world.

The search for a solution to this problem would ultimately lead Welch back to the mountains and the natural world with the renewed impetus to live as a hermit. In a sense, his life as well as *RoB* ends with the fifth and last book, “The Song Mt. Tamalpais Sings,” where Welch also moves back to the lyric mode. The book’s first and eponymous poem celebrates Mt. Tamalpais, sacred mountain of the Beat generation with the refrain, “This is the last place. There is nowhere else to go” (1). The speaker hints here that he has finally arrived at some kind of ultimate realization and resting place.



The following poem, “Olema Satori,” confirms this. Olema is a town in Marin County near Mt. Tamalpais; satori is the state of awakening or Buddhist realization. The poem is a record of a walk taken by its speaker and the creatures encountered along the way: “This is all you get,” Olema said” (13-14), implying that this ordinary walk in Olema is able to convey a profound mental state, that of satori.

*Ring of Bone* ends with “Song of the Turkey Buzzard,” in praise of Welch’s totem animal or vehicle (in Buddhist terminology), reiterating Welch’s understanding of the interconnectedness of all beings in the fact that one man’s body is food for other creatures, specifically vultures. The poem of two parts with a coda begins by praising Tamalpais and invoking the buzzard, then quotes from Tibetan Buddhist yogi and guru Milarepa, another hermit poet known to Welch and author of the *Songs of Milarepa*<sup>5</sup> The speaker offers himself to the vultures and life continues, reminiscent of the story of Buddha giving his body to a starving tiger from the Hinayana Jataka Tales, the stories that tell of the previous births of the Buddha.

The poem also foreshadows Welch’s own death and disappearance and the offering of his body to the vultures that may have found him near Kitkitdizze in 1971. Not only did Welch’s actions have precedents in Buddhist tradition, they were also a literal way to lose the self. Welch alludes to suicide (literal and figurative) in an unsent letter of July 1962 to Robert Duncan, written from Ferlinghetti’s cabin during a mental breakdown Welch experienced there: “And I found that whatever it is that chooses to flow through me is so powerful it will destroy me if I resist it *in any way*. That I must

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<sup>5</sup> In a 1969 interview with David Meltzer, Welch comments that Milarepa was “probably the greatest poet that ever lived” (310).

open to it or die. And the death will be a suicide. . . .” (*IR* II 52). He goes on to name poets who have committed suicide, such as Hart Crane, and notes, “The really tragic thing about the drownings and gunshots and the irreclaimable madneses is this: They, Poets all of them, missed the truth of it by a quarter of an inch. You do not have to do it with a gun. You do not really do it with a gun” (*IR* II 55). He implies here that the elimination or transformation of the self (the ego) is the job of the poet leading to a figurative death in the poem. Ironically and tragically, Welch was in the end not able to do it without a gun.

#### Conclusion

In following *RoB* to its conclusion, this essay ends where it began, with Welch’s disappearance, and with the invocation of the hermit poet whose life he lived (this time the Tibetan hermit Milarepa alluded to in “Song of the Turkey Buzzard”), thereby confirming the circle as guiding metaphor of his spiritual autobiography. In *RoB*’s last poem, the speaker’s body also forms a circle between the old and the new life as the request for disembowelment by vultures leads to “my new form,” recalling the Buddhist idea of rebirth.

However, it is not clear that Welch’s spiritual autobiography, as he called *RoB*, actually achieved the commonly held goals of this genre – that is in the Christian context to demonstrate the subject’s path from sin to salvation, monitoring the soul’s condition and describing the conversion experience.<sup>6</sup> This sense of salvation translated into a Buddhist context entails moving from a life of suffering to the enlightened life in

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<sup>6</sup> See Starr’s discussion of spiritual autobiography for more on this.

Hinayana Buddhism or enlightenment followed by the return to help others, the path of the Bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism. However, in “Song of the Turkey Buzzard,” Welch seems to acknowledge that he has not broken the circle of suffering from birth to death to rebirth. Instead of the felt need to “break the brain,” and arrive at Enlightenment, he instead experienced the destruction of the Self through what we may suppose was a self-inflicted or longed for death. Some may also consider Welch’s understanding of Buddhism as superficial and lacking in the kind of practice-based presentation of Zen evident in Snyder or Whalen’s work.

This mapping of Welch’s lived experience and that of the speaker of *RoB* on the template of spiritual autobiography may also be problematic for other reasons. Most importantly, Donald Allen chose to publish not only the collection of poems Welch had originally designated as forming the five books of his spiritual autobiography, *RoB*, but also other previously uncollected or unpublished poems, somewhat destroying Welch’s intended whole. Privileging the work as spiritual autobiography also privileges form over content and somewhat neglects the lyrical and performative aspects of Welch’s poetry. There are also other important and legitimate ways to read Welch (as a nature poet, for example). In addition, significant poems in relation to such a spiritual autobiography are not necessarily the early works by which Welch was known in anthologies during his lifetime. However, I find that the spiritual underlies other aspects of Welch’s poetry and is a way to better understand his body of work as a coherent whole, especially as he put it together himself in the original manuscript for *Ring of Bone*.



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