

Book Review

COVID19 SUTRAS

Hank Lazer

Lavender Ink, 2020

Review by Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

Hank Lazer began writing his wondrous *COVID19 SUTRAS*—a collection of twelve-line poems, four lines to a stanza, three stanzas to a poem—around the time that everything was closing down: “books and blossoms / spring & all . . .” are the opening two lines. The second of these is not an accident; *Spring and All* is the title of William Carlos Williams’ 1923 book whose title poem begins “By the road to the contagious hospital . . .” Williams was a doctor, and his poem was written soon after the end of the devastating flu pandemic of 1918 and 1919. Lazer is not a doctor—he is an eminent American poet and a long-standing Zen practitioner—and he is writing at the beginning of a pandemic, not afterward. But the impulse is the same. On the one hand, a worldwide pandemic sickening and killing people in large numbers that we can barely comprehend, upending normal life, in 1918 as in 2020, with schools and businesses closing, people advised to wear masks, social gatherings forbidden or restricted, hospitals at times overwhelmed, some people and places taking it seriously, others not so much, with the expected outcomes of such choices. On the other hand, there is the natural world, which doesn’t care about a virus killing humans. Not only “blossoms/spring” but, at the end of the first poem:

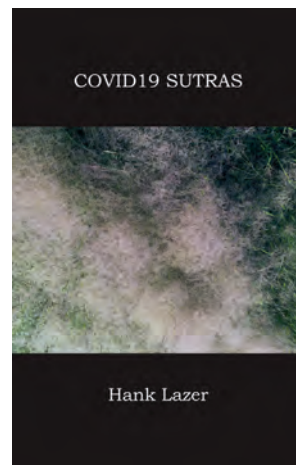
*foxes—young ones
came by for the wild
salmon cooking on
the gas grill*

Lazer, who lives part-time on an Alabama farm and part-time in Tuscaloosa, where he teaches at the University of Alabama, is alert to the disjunction. And he is also alert to the provisional nature of human life

*i am ready
to become something
else am i
really dissolve*

*dissolute to face
or turn away from
who said or ?
this is it*

*& when the virus
hit can we
change or does
connection break away*



As the poem above makes clear, Lazer has deeply absorbed his Buddhist practice, so deeply that it does not leave an obvious trace. But just as it is not necessary for a reader to notice the invocation of William Carlos Williams in the book’s second line, these poems can do the work of poems on the reader whether or not the reader has any knowledge of Buddhism.

There are many of these quiet Buddhist invocations. For example:

*the treasure store
is open you
can take what
you want—no*

*you can take
what you need
through practice
you may learn*

*to receive what
is already yours
here is the bell sound
to awaken you*

This is as an excellent summary of a good chunk of Mahayana and Zen Buddhism. But it’s OK if you don’t recognize this. Lazer is telling us something deeply human: what you want to receive is already yours; listen and awaken. We don’t need any other context.

Lazer is writing at the beginning of the strange new COVID world—“what will we do / cut our hair / go bowling”; “apart & together / we gather / by means of / our devices”—and the book appeared in mid-summer, so was written when we still might have had the delusion that the plague would end if not immediately then reasonably soon. Its chapter headings are: *early days; flattening the curve; phased reopening; we’re back?;* and the last section, after the death of George Floyd, *I can’t breathe*. Because the pandemic has lasted so much longer than we thought at the time, some of

these seem naïve—did the curve ever flatten? Are the phases of reopening well defined or chaotic?—but at the time that is how we thought. As Ezra Pound said, poetry is news that stays news—and Lazer, reporting in the moment, has the sense to put a question mark after *we're back*.

The last section is anchored in George Floyd's death, and in some of its poems the horror of human injustice forces the poetic lines out of the space the page allows. For example, here is a single line invoking the demonstrations after Floyd's death:

*Yes, shattered glass, burning building, these are the
voices of the unheard, mixed in with others intent
on something else*

Yes, that is a single line. If you were reading it out loud, it would be read with one breath. Finally, the political/medical/human moment is distilled:

*so that the words
equality justice democracy
mark something other
than our shame*

*pain goes straight
to our emptiness
repeated videos enshrine
the victims what to do*

*with two viruses
death of a nation
blurred as i age
into what's next*

We can recognize “pain goes straight / to our emptiness” as a sort of double-meaning pun—Buddhist emptiness? Emotional emptiness?—but what's important is the challenge that Lazer is giving us: In the multiple crises facing us, what do we do? What comes next?

The curious reader may wonder why these poems are called *Sutras*. Just as this book is connected to William Carlos Williams's response to a similar pandemic moment, so it is connected to a similar political moment, the antiwar protests of the 1960s, which produced Allen Ginsberg's *Wichita Vortex Sutra*, and to the ecstatic early encounter by beatniks with Buddhism, for example, Ginsberg's *Sunflower Sutra*. More traditionally, as a long-time student of the Soto teacher and poet Norman Fischer, Lazer is deeply connected to Dogen's *Mountains and Waters Sutra*—on which Fischer recently published a book, *Mountains and Rivers Sutra* (Sumeru Press, 2020). Finally, the dominant format of short stanzas is reminiscent of such pithy teachings as some of the Theravada sutras, and the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. So why not call these poems *sutras*? They are, in the ways that matter, wisdom poems. ♦

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and find our true human being's job.

We all come into this world with empty hands, and we leave with empty hands. Nobody said to us, “Hey! How would you like to spend a little time on planet earth?” And when it's time to go, nobody asks our permission. When our time is up, we're gone. There's no reason, and we have no choice in the matter. But while we are alive, what should we do? How do we live our life? How do we put our empty hands to work?

Every day, all of us have to do many things. But most important is why do we do something? What is our motivation? Zen Master Seung Sahn always asked, “Why do you eat every day?” That is a very important question. Is it for love? Is it for money? Is it only for me? Or is it for all beings?

Our human life is a precious opportunity to transform no reason into great reason, and no choice into great choice. But how do we do that? That is a million-dollar question that all of us have to answer every day. Each one of us for ourselves, moment to moment to moment. It is called the great work of life and death.

Today, I'm getting a Zen stick and a new job: Ji Do Poep Sa. My hands have new work to do. “Ji Do” means “point the way.” “Poep Sa” means “teacher,” which means helping other people. To me, this means that my inside job and my outside job have finally come together. It has taken a long time, and I am very happy.

[Raises the Zen stick over her head.]

This life has no meaning, no reason, and no choice.

[Hits the floor with the Zen stick and raises it again.]

But through our practice, we can change no meaning to great meaning, which is great love. We can change no choice to great choice, which is our great vow, the great bodhisattva way.

[Hits the floor with the Zen stick and raises it again.]

No meaning, no reason, no choice, or great meaning, great reason, great choice? Which one do you choose?

KATZ!

The candles are burning brightly; the Zoom screen shows me smiling faces. Thank you for coming. ♦

Dyan Eagles began studying with Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1974. She received inka in December 2020. Dyan is one of the founding members of the Cambridge Zen Center, where she served as housemaster and head dharma teacher. Prior to retiring in 2019, Dyan was the founder and CEO of DharmaCrafts, Inc.