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# TWO CONVERSATIONS OF SAIGYŌ AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN THE HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL JAPANESE POETRY

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In the study of the relationship between Japanese poetry and the Japanese religions, the problem of esoteric Buddhism in poetry deserves special attention.

Most critical works on poetry written between the end of the Heian period (794–1185) and 1600 discuss poetry not only in general terms of Buddhism or *honjisuijaku* but, in fact, mainly according to the precepts of esoteric Tendai and Shingon Buddhism. Among such critical works on poetry are the *Toshiyori Zuinō*<sup>1</sup> by Minamoto no Toshiyori (d. 1129) and the *Korai Fūtei-shō*<sup>2</sup> by Fujiwara no Shunzei (1114–1204), who advocated the use of the *shikan*-meditation of Tendai in order to reach the purity and depth of heart necessary for an ideal composition of poetry. Particularly noteworthy in the area of esoteric Buddhism in poetry is the *Nomori no Kagami*,<sup>3</sup> a critical work on poetry which is a polemic – quite violent in certain of its passages – against the poetry of Fujiwara no [Kyōgoku] Tamekane (1254–1332). There are of course many other such works, including treatises about linked-verse (*renga*) poetry, and in the Edo period (1600–1868) such works as the *Shirin Shūyō*,<sup>4</sup> which relate the way of poetry to the teachings of esoteric Buddhism.

The purpose of this article is to present two conversations, both focusing on the well-known poet-priest Saigyō (1118–1190), as important documents for the study of poetry in relation to esoteric Buddhism. The

<sup>1</sup> *Toshiyori Zuinō*, Nihon Kagaku Taikei, comp. by Sasaki Nobutsuna, vol. 1, Kazama Shobō, Tōkyō, 1957.

<sup>2</sup> *Korai Fūtei-shō*, Nihon Kagaku Taikei, vol. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Nomori no Kagami*, Nihon Kagaku Taikei, vol. 4. Probably written in the thirteenth century.

<sup>4</sup> *Shirin Shūyō*, Nihon Kagaku Taikei, vol. 6.

first, between Saigyō<sup>5</sup> and priest Myōe (1173–1232),<sup>6</sup> is recorded in the *Myōe Shōnin Denki*. The other, between Saigyō and Jien (1155–1229)<sup>7</sup> is recorded in the collection of stories called *Saseki-shū*.<sup>8</sup>

In the early Kamakura period (1185–1333), toward the end of his life, Saigyō often paid visits to the young priest Myōe. To judge from the content of one of their conversations, Myōe must have received instruction in poetry from Saigyō from the point of view of Buddhism or instruction in Buddhism with special attention to the practice of poetry. The *Myōe Shōnin Denki* records this seance between the two:

Saigyō Shōnin often came for a talk, and on one occasion his remarks were as follows: “The poems I compose are far from being like ordinary poems. People’s feelings are aroused at every and all things that exist in the universe such as blossoms, cuckoos, the moon, and snow; yet, they are unable to see or hear that the many phenomena are all nonsubstantial. But poems composed about these things – are they not ‘True Words’ [Shingon]?<sup>9</sup> I compose poems about the blossoms, yet I am not conscious that they are blossoms, and though I may compose about the moon, I do not think that it is the moon. Thus I merely compose poetry according to a communion with things and following my inspiration. The red rainbow, rising against the sky, looks as if the empty sky is making

<sup>5</sup> Famous poet of the late Heian and early Kamakura period. Saigyō entered the priesthood for unknown reasons at the age of twenty-two. He lived for many years on Mt. Kōya, the headquarters of Shingon Buddhism, and traveled extensively. He joined with priests Jakushō, Jien, Jakuren, and Fujiwara no Shunzei to compose poetry. His poems can be found in collections such as *Kikigaki Zanshū*, *Sankashū* and *Shinkokin Wakashū* where he figures as the best represented poet.

<sup>6</sup> Early Kamakura period poet and priest of the Kegon sect. He studied under priest Mongaku at Jingoji Temple in Takao. In 1206 Myōe founded the Kōzanji Temple also in Takao. He practiced concentration and sitting meditation. He is noted for having restored Kegon Buddhism. His poems are included in the *Shinchokusen Wakashū* and other imperial and private anthologies.

<sup>7</sup> At the age of 37, Jien became high priest of the Tendai sect. He associated himself with poets such as Saigyō, Fujiwara no Shunzei, Teika, and the ex-Emperor Gotoba. He has 92 verses in the *Shinkokin Wakashū* and counts as one of the most prolific poets in the history of Japanese literature. His poems can also be found in the *Shūgyokushū*. He is also the author of the *Gukanshō* (1220) a history of Japan from Emperor Jimmu to ex-Emperor Gotoba, who was defeated in the Shōkyū war and exiled. After this war, Jien’s fortune seems to have waned.

<sup>8</sup> Although the authenticity of both conversations cannot be ascertained, they nevertheless present views commonly held in the middle ages (chūsei) concerning the relationship between esoteric Buddhism and the way of poetry.

<sup>9</sup> *Mantras*: mysterious formulas used in esoteric Buddhism to establish a communion with a Buddha or bodhisattva. (*Dharani* are similar formulas.)

itself visible in colors. The bright sunshine looks as if it were the empty sky that is brightening itself. However, the empty sky is not the origin of the light nor that which creates the colors. This is the same with me. Realizing that the empty sky is but a semblance, I color [in my poetry] various kinds of appearances, but these appearances are not properties of my heart. Such poetry is the true body of the Buddha, and therefore, composing a poem is the same as carving a statue of Buddha. Conceiving a verse is the same as reciting the esoteric True Words [Shingon]. Through this kind of poetry, I can understand the Law. If you fail to reach this stage, and if you study poetry without care, then it becomes a serious heresy."<sup>10</sup>

Saigyō seems to point out in this conversation that poetry, in order not to become a heresy, should be composed in a religious endeavor. The religious aspect consists mainly in recognizing that all phenomena which the poet wishes to take up in his poetry are fundamentally nonsubstantial and have no absolute reality. They are void or mere semblances, like the rainbow in the sky. Consequently being what they are — nonsubstantial — the poet should exclude, if he composes in a religious spirit, all consciousness about reality, temporal or spacial, of the objects. Blossoms should not just be the blossoms that one may have in front of one's eyes. The process of cognition through consciousness or intellectual effort should be avoided.

The source of Saigyō's poetry is rather what he calls *en* or a communion. *En* (also *ketchien*) is a term frequently encountered in Buddhist texts to indicate a communion or union with a Buddha, bodhisattva, divinity, sacred place, or the like. Here, however, Saigyō seems to be pointing to perception of an object without reliance on its presence. Two interpretations are possible. He may have meant a communion between mind and object or simply a fictional recreation of an object as a reflection of the mind.

This communion destroys rather than accepts the physical reality of the object and reduces it to its underlying permanent essence: the *idea*. Thus Saigyō is less drawn toward a particular cherry tree which may be blooming in front of him than to the *idea* of cherry blossoms — cherry blossoms in their universal aspects. By reducing an object to its underlying essence, the poet in a sense repeats its creation and brings it back to its origin.

<sup>10</sup> *Myōe Shōnin Shiryō*, vol. 1, Tōkyō Daigaku Shuppan-kai, Tōkyō, 1971, pp. 302–303. Also in *Toganoo Myōe Shōnin Denki* by Kikai, (Kokubun-) Tōhō Bukkyō Sōsho, vol. 5, Denki-bu, Kokubun Tōhō Bukkyō Sōsho Kankō-kai, Tōkyō, 1925, p. 287.

Yet the origin or, in other words, the creator, cannot be identified with the objects he has created, and in the same way, the poet's heart, the source of poetic creation, cannot be identified with what it has produced. Like the rainbow appearing in the sky, the poet projects a provisional reality into the void without being affected by the results.

This relationship between creator and the created is similar to the carving of a statue of Buddha; it cannot be said that the statue represents the artist as much as what it symbolizes – the power of Buddha. Like the sculptor, the poet recedes into the background and is merely an intermediary between the creator and the created. According to esoteric teachings, all creation participates in the creator despite the fact that the former is fundamentally different from the latter. A statue of Buddha is not a fetish, but an object of real-symbolic value. A poem must be the same – a created object that surpasses its author. Just as the empty sky is not the source of the rainbow, so the poet is not, consciously at least, the source of what he creates. The source is rather the depth of his heart or mind (*kokoro*), a term which is frequently used in criticism of poetry, and which sometimes strongly reminds one of C. G. Jung's theories of the collective subconsciousness as a source of art. Similarly, in using the term *kyō* (inspiration), Saigyō seems to be saying that his acts of poetic creation were beyond his will.

Various statements in the *Nomori no Kagami* reecho these views as stated in Saigyō's conversation with Myōe, but explain them in a more theoretical vein:

To express one's true heart through vain thoughts and to juxtapose foolish words [compose poetry] are the same as the two teachings, provisional teaching and absolute teaching [gonjitsu],<sup>11</sup> and are the same as the three theories of void, phenomena, and what is in between (*kūkechū*).<sup>12</sup> Speaking of esoteric teachings, the

<sup>11</sup> Provisional teachings set up to guide people to the absolute teachings. Also *jitsu* is sometimes used to mean a collective subconsciousness where all men and things are basically equal. *Gon* means consciousness which classifies all objects. *Gon* comes out of *jitsu*.

<sup>12</sup> *Kū* means nonsubstantiality, void.

*Ke* means provisional existence that comes out of *kū*.

*Chū* means that aspect of everything that transcends *kū* and *ke* and has an absolute value which cannot be explained by language or reasoning. In an actual phenomenon only *kū* and *ke* are apparent. *Chū* is superior to the two former and represents their absolute existence. *Chū* participates in both *kū* and *ke*. *Kūkechū* are three aspects of phenomena; their basic dependence upon conditions of causation, and their temporary existence. As seen from both aspects, *Chū* means the true nature of the phenomenon. *Kūkechū* is also applied to poetry in Fujiwara no Shunzei's *Korai Fūtei-shō*.

expression of feelings towards the myriad things must follow the law of the intimate relationship between ultimate principle and appearance (*jirigumitsu*).<sup>13</sup> To express oneself by tender words is the same as the three secrets of *mudrā*, *dharaṇi*, and *bhāvanā* (*shinkōi*).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, to compose poetry about nearby things as if they were far away, about far away things as if they were near and about the famous places one has never seen as if one had seen them is the miraculous secret technique of esoteric Buddhism — the style in which there is nothing that cannot be reached by the power of the mind. Furthermore, to give a heart to something that has no heart and speak for something that cannot speak, whether these things are inanimate or not — this means the enlightenment of immediate Buddhahood [*sokushin jōbutsu*].<sup>15</sup>

The relation between poetry and the absolute transcendental truth, is comparable to the relation between the absolute and the provisional truths; in other words, between truths and allegory. Although the provisional truth emanates from the absolute truth, the latter by far transcends the former. The former is a vulgarization of and cannot be identified with the latter. Poetry, too, is a simplification or vulgarization of the ultimate truth and a means of giving guidance to the people. It is a link between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, and as such, it can, like a statue of Buddha, become an object of meditation or a means of spiritually approaching the world of Buddha.

Following such reasoning, Saigyō cautions against merely relying on the physical aspects of objects. The objects, whether the blossoms, the moon, the snow, or whatever, must be conceived as transient phenomena which emanate from the creator only to go back sooner or later to where they came from. It is also wrong to make poetry too dependent upon language. Language is no end in itself but merely a means to give a momentary expression to a higher truth. Though language is used in poetry, the objects are not classified or distinguished as such. Blossoms are all or any blossoms. The moon is no moon of a particular time or place but the

<sup>13</sup> *Ri* (ultimate principle or teaching) is expressed in words *ji* (provisional teachings) to guide people to the Truth. *Ji* is sometimes also used to mean phenomena classified by consciousness. *Ri* means the ultimate principle in which all differentiations are abolished.

<sup>14</sup> *Mudra* is the sign or gesture by joining fingers in order to establish a union with a Buddha or bodhisattva or other divinity, which these signs symbolize.

*Dharani* are mysterious formulas or sounds that achieve a union with the Buddha or bodhisattva which they symbolize.

*Bhavana* is meditation to achieve union with a Buddha or bodhisattva.

<sup>15</sup> *Nomori no Kagami*, Nihon Kagaku Taikei, *op.cit.*, p. 68.



eternal moon. The world of poetry, accordingly, must be an intermediary between the physical and transcendental worlds. Poems like mysterious formulas and *mudras* are symbols of the absolute truth. As such they can become an adequate expression of meditation, and religious insight.

The author of the *Nomori no Kagami* clearly states that poetry can become a means of attaining Buddhahood in one's lifetime, that is, of reaching enlightenment. The poet can achieve this by creating a fictional reality which emanates from the ultimate truth or from the depths of the poet's heart, where all distinction and classification disappear and where everything merges into the ultimate oneness. The depth of the heart has the power to put feeling into things, to give them a heart and to make them speak. In so doing the poet completes creation. He creates a higher reality.

The similarities between Saigyō's teachings to Myōe and the *Nomori no Kagami* are obvious. They represent views of poetry as expounded in esoteric Buddhism. According to these views, poetry can become a valuable means of Buddhist worship and practice. This was also the subject of Saigyō's conversation with priest Jien, the later high priest of Tendai and one of the most prolific poets in the history of Japanese literature.

When Jien Wajō of Yoshimizu [Ōtani] asked Saigyō, after Saigyō had renounced the world, to teach him the essence of the esoteric doctrine of the Tendai sect, Saigyō said: "You should first practice poetry. If you are unable to compose poetry then you cannot understand the essence of Shingon." Having been told this, it is said that Jien practiced poetry, whereupon Saigyō transmitted to him the teachings.<sup>16</sup>

Priest Muju (1226–1312), in whose *Saseki-shū* this conversation is recorded, goes on to explain the transmission of teachings according to esoteric precepts. He emphasizes the importance of purity of heart in communication between teacher and disciple. To this Muju adds what was probably part of Saigyō's teachings to Jien:

What is called the letter 'a' (aji) is the unchanging essence of all things, it is impossible to transmit it in words. It is simply the eternal, unchanged essence of one's heart. This is what the letter 'a' represents; this is where the true meaning of esoteric teachings lies. The letter 'a' can be conceived after having eliminated all sins from one's heart and all splits within it. The letter 'a' is nothing but the unchanged, primordial essence of man. This is probably why [Saigyō] told [Jien]

<sup>16</sup> *Saseki-shū*, Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei, vol. 85, annot. by Watanabe Tsunaya, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō, 1966, pp. 251–252.

to use *waka* poetry rather than any other superficial means. As a means of forgetting the pains of sin which are caused by the bustling afflictions of the world as well as a means of attaining the stage of enlightenment, the way of poetry is truly effective. This is also the reason why the deities of our country who were incarnations of the Buddhas, enjoyed themselves, in times past, in the composition of poetry.<sup>17</sup>

The composition of poetry through meditation on the sanscrit letter 'a' (*aji-kan*) is one of the techniques advocated by esoteric Buddhism.<sup>18</sup> It is known in particular through a poem by Myōe, where the letter 'a' (here *aka* = bright) becomes identical with the moon:

Aka aka ya	O bright, bright
Aka aka aka ya	O bright, bright, bright,
Aka aka ya	O bright, bright,
Aka ya aka aka	Bright, O bright, bright
Aka aka ya tsuki	Bright, O bright moon. <sup>19</sup>

Yamada Shōzen sees in this poem a merger of the poet's mind with the moon through the practice of *aji-kan* meditation.<sup>20</sup> The purity of the poet's heart is absorbed into the purity of nature. Like Myōe, Saigyō left us with numerous poems about the moon. The moon in their poems is no object of sheer beauty but has to be, according to Yamada's words, elevated to the level of religion.<sup>21</sup> The following example is from Saigyō:

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Aji* or *aji-kan* means the conception of the entire universe as the letter 'a'. The relation of this with the moon is the idea expounded by the priest Jichie (786–847) and later by Kakuban (d. 1143) in such works as *Aji-gatchirin-kan*. According to the latter's views, the white circle in which, the sanscrit letter 'a' is painted in *aji mandala* and in front of which, *aji* meditation is performed represents the moon. In other words, the moon and the letter 'a' are one and the same. Kakuban was a priest of Mt. Kōya before he left for the Negoro Temple. Also Saigyō lived on Mt. Kōya for some thirty years. Professor Yamada Shōzen of Taishō University presented a paper in the First International Japanese-Studies Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies, Sept. 21–23, 1976, in Zurich (Switzerland) about *gatchirin-kan*.

<sup>19</sup> Transl. Ed. Seidensticker, in Kawabata Yasunari, *Japan the Beautiful and Myself*, Kōdansha Ltd. Tōkyō, 1969, p. 71. The Japanese text is taken from *Myōe Shōnin Kashū* (Kokubun-)Tōhō Bukkyō Sōsho, vol. 7, Bungei-bu comp. by Washio Junkei, Tōkyō, 1928, p. 475.

<sup>20</sup> Yamada Shōzen, "Bungaku-shi to Bukkyō-shi," *Kanshō Nihon Kōten Bungaku Bekkan, Nihon Bungaku-shi Nyūmon* (Tōkyō: Kadokawa, 1978), p. 417.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416, *passim*.



Covered by the clouds  
 Over Mt. Futakami  
 The moon is invisible,  
 Yet in my clear mind  
 I can see it.<sup>22</sup>

Jien also wrote many poems about the moon. The following example again expresses a merger of mind and moon:

Sharing with each other  
 The sight of this autumn night;  
 The mind in the moon  
 The moon in the mind.<sup>23</sup>

Most critical works on poetry written in the middle ages (*chūsei*) reflect the spirit of Saigyō's conversations. One wonders therefore if critical terms such as *kokoro* (heart), *ushin* (with heart), *mushin* (without heart), and *makoto* (truth) to mention only a few, are not a religious rather than a purely aesthetic vocabulary. One also wonders if the medieval poets such as Saigyō, Jien, Muju, Ikkyū etc. are not also religious figures rather than "pure" poets. In view of the rather obvious synthesis of religion and poetry in the period, one may well question the suitability of an "art for art's sake" approach to medieval Japanese poetry and literature.

<sup>22</sup> *Kikigaki Shū* in *Sankashū*, *Kinyōshū*, Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei, vol. 29, annot. by Kazamaki Keijirō et al. Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō, 1961, p. 282.

<sup>23</sup> *Shūgyoku Shū*, comp. by Taga Munehaya, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, Tōkyō, 1971, poem no. 4644, p. 465.