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Buddhism and Haiku

By Reginald H. Blyth, Tôkyô

It is a common idea, both among scholars and ordinary people, that the Japanese were originally a light-hearted, pleasure-loving people, who were changed by the advent of Buddhism into a melancholy, fatalistic, pessimistic and indeed morbid nation. If this was so, it was a heavy price to pay for Japanese culture, which is all Buddhistic, in spirit, if not in form. Compare for example the following, the first a *waka* from the book of the *Manyôshû*, the second one of the best known of Bashô's *haiku*, written nine hundred years later:

春過ぎて
夏来るらし
白妙の
衣乾したり
天の香具山

Spring has passed away
And summer is come;
Look where clothes
Are spread in the sun
On the heavenly hill of Kagu!
(*Manyôshû*)

枯枝に
鳥のとまりけり
秋の暮

On a withered branch
A crow is perched
In the autumn evening.
(Bashô)

This crow is sometimes taken as representing Bashô himself; it might be taken as the crow of Buddhism gloomily surveying a world of pain and grief.

I do not understand the matter in this way at all. Buddhism was developed in India as a spiritual philosophy. It passed into China, where it was blended with Chinese practicality, and then, passing through Korea, entered Japan where it was for the first time put into practice in the daily life of the people. This latter of course took a long time, and is the popularization of what began as purely aristocratic pursuits, *chanoyu*, *ikebana*, *renku*, etc.

This putting of the principles of Mahâyâna Buddhism into practice in eating and drinking, in walking and talking, is an evidence, indirect, but all the more conclusive, of the fact that the Japanese people were Buddhists before ever Buddhism came to Japan.

They took to Buddhism "as a duck takes to water." The duck is not converted to the water; it is a *water-bird*. To illustrate what I mean clearly, I will take an example from my own experience, not unrelated to Buddhism. When I was eighteen years old, one day a man said to me, "Do you eat meat?"

“Yes, of course,” I replied. “Don’t you know that you can live quite healthily without having animals killed for you to eat?” he asked. “Why, yes, I suppose so. . . .,” I mumbled,—and from that day to this I have never eaten any meat or fish. It is quite clear from this anecdote that I was vegetarian before the man asked me these two simple questions, that I was a born vegetarian, or to express it in the language of Zen, in a transcendental way, I was a vegetarian *before* I was born, beyond time. In the same way I mean that the Japanese were Buddhists. For that reason Buddhism still exists in Japan, and not in the country of its origin. The Japanese are Buddhists in the same sense that they are Japanese.

If what I have said is true, the description of “a Buddhist” and that of “a Japanese” should more or less coincide, and I propose to try to show that this is so. Many people may object to this from the outset, as being too complimentary to the Japanese, but a true Buddhist could not do so because according to Buddhism *every* man is at bottom a Buddhist. Again, it may be urged that to describe the nature of Buddhism may be fairly easy, but to give an account of the characteristics of a typical and representative Japanese is extremely difficult. This is so, and I think it will therefore be advisable to limit the description of the Japanese culture, and indeed to one aspect of it, namely *haiku*. I hold *haiku* to be the flower and culmination of all Eastern culture, and that it occupies the same position in one half of the world as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare or Goethe do in the other half of the world. Let us look then at Buddhism and *haiku*, taking *haiku* as representing the national character of the Japanese as expressed in 17 syllables.

(1) Just as Buddhism in India took over a great mass of pre-Buddhistic experience and philosophy, so Buddhism in Japan absorbed much that existed in Japan prior to the sixth century. Such *haiku* as the following show the primitive Japanese animism which was a kind of spiritual democracy in which animals on the one hand and the gods on the other were conceived in a human way, and as lying close above and close below human beings.

留守の間に	The god is absent;
あれたる神の	Dead leaves are piling,
落葉かな	And all is deserted.

(Bashô)

The god has gone to Izumo for the yearly meeting, and the shrine has a deserted air, dead leaves remaining unswept.

さまづけに	Bringing up the silkworms,
育てられたる	They call them
蠶かな	“Mister.”

(Issa)

The word “sama” implies some gentle, pious, familiar attitude to the silkworm.

(2) The feeling of the transitoriness of life is found everywhere in the

world. Buddhism gave a variety of means for its expression. In the following verse, Bashô tells us, indirectly, that human life is unreal with nothing permanent in it.

たこ壺や	The octopuses in the jars:
はかなき夢を	Transient dreams
夏の月	Under the summer moon.
	(Bashô)

(3) Selflessness is of the essence of Buddhism, as it was of the Japanese artist. It was the good element in Emperor worship. One of the most interesting examples of this selflessness in *haiku* derives not from Buddhism but rather from Taoism. Wafû (和風) says:

蝶消えて	The butterfly having disappeared,
魂我に	My spirit
返りけり	Came back to me.
	(Wafû)

A few days before his death, Bashô composed the following, lying in bed:

秋深き	It is deep autumn:
隣は何を	My neighbour—
する人ぞ	How does he live, I wonder?
	(Bashô)

How is he passing through this world, Bashô wonders. There is the same interest in the world of trees:

五六本	Five or six,
よりてしだる	Drooping down together,—
柳かな	Willow trees.
	(Bashô)

(4) Loneliness may be thought a specially Japanese quality rather than a Buddhist, but compare the following passages from the *Zenrinkushû* (禪林句集):

兀然無事坐、	Sitting quietly doing nothing,
春來草自生。	Spring comes, grass grows of itself.
樹密猿聲響、	The cries of the monkeys echo through the dense forest;
波澄雁影深。	In the clear water, the wild geese are mirrored deep.
	(<i>Zenrinkushû</i>)

Bashô is the master of the loneliness of nature and man suffused with each other:

うき我を
淋しがらせよ
かんこ鳥

Ah, *kanḱodori*,
Deepen thou
My loneliness.

(Bashō)

The loneliness of Buson is that of Nature alone:

菜の花や
鯨もよらず
海暮れぬ

Flowers of rape:
No whale approaches;
It darkens over the sea.

(Buson)

The loneliness of Issa is that of Bashō, but with less of nature and more of man:

苦の娑婆や
櫻が咲けば
さいたとて

A world of brief and pain:
Flowers bloom;
Even then...

(Issa)

The loneliness of Shiki is that of Buson more inclusive, but with less serenity:

梨さくや
いくさのあとの
崩れ家

By a house collapsed,
A pear tree is blooming;
Here a battle was fought.

(Shiki)

(5) Buddhism is often considered fatalistic and lacking in a positive spirit, but the *grateful* acceptance of whatever happens means cooperating actively with life as it moves towards its far-off and unknown goal. Buson has a verse expressive of his complete and life-long acceptance of destiny:

西吹けば
ひがしにたまる
落葉かな

Blowing from the west,
Fallen leaves gather
In the east.

(Buson)

Ryōkan has a more tragic verse:

たふるれば
たふるゝまゝの
庭の草

The grasses of the garden,—
They fall,
And lie as they fall.

(Ryōkan)

There are two verses by Issa which show the interrelation of man and nature in daily life:

山水に	I take a nap,
米をつかせて	Making the mountain water
晝寝かな	Pound the rice.
	(Issa)

Issa makes the mountain water pound the rice while he is asleep.

扇にて	The peony
尺をとらせる	Made me measure it
牡丹かな	With my fan.
	(Issa)

The peony makes Issa measure it with the fan he carries.

(6) In India Buddhism seems to have been a highly philosophical thing, and this tendency increased in China, but at the same time there was an opposite tendency, culminating in Zen and Jôdo, towards simplicity and non-intellectuality. There is a verse by Ryôta which illustrates this:

ものいはず	They spoke no word,
客と亭主と	The visitor, the host,
白菊と	And the white chrysanthemum.
	(Ryôta)

(7) Mahâyâna Buddhism is essentially paradoxical, and the great merit of the Japanese people was their realization (making real) once more in daily life of these contradictions which once, far away and long ago were derived from practical life in Buddhist and pre-Buddhist India. The best, or at least the clearest and most concrete example of this in Japanese culture is that of the movements of *waki* and *shite* in Nô, and those of the Tea Master, for all their walking is a no-walking. They

入林不動草、	entering the forest, do not disturb
	a blade of grass;
入水不立波。	entering the water, do not
	cause a ripple.
	(Zenrinkushû)

Issa feels strongly the contradiction between mind and body, absolute and relative, ideal and real:

柴の戸や	A brushwood gate;
錠の代りに	For a lock,
かたつむり	This snail.
	(Issa)

Compare also the following by Dansui (團水):

御幸にも
編笠ぬがぬ
案山子かな

Even before His Majesty,
The scarecrow does not remove
His plaited hat.

(8) One of the criticisms made of the Japanese is that they have never fought for and obtained freedom, especially political and social freedom. Some people connect this fact with their being Buddhists. If this is so, it does not conflict with my present thesis, namely, that Japanese are Buddhists by nature, that their Buddhism springs from within and is not something which changed them from without. Freedom is, however, a very elusive thing; it is almost synonymous with life itself, and may and does exist apart from its (proper) social expression. Indeed, it is something in the nature of the Japanese character, to be subservient, even servile to authority, to rush from one extreme to another of fashion and philosophy, and yet at the same time to preserve some kind of inner, secret life that shows itself only in the arrangement of some branches in the *tokonoma*, or in the veiled criticism and humour of *senryū*. The freedom of *haiku* comes out in many odd ways. For example, there is the freedom from what is usually considered dirty or unseemly.

秋の夜や
夢と鼾と
きりぎりす

An autumn night;
Dreams, snores,
The chirping of crickets.

(Suiō)

I think it would be difficult to find any serious poem in English in which snores were introduced.

夕顔の
花で涕かむ
娘かな

The young girl
Blew her nose
In the evening-glory.

(Issa)

鶯が
梅の小枝に
糞をして

The *uguisu*
Poops
On the slender plum branch.

(Onitsura)

(9) Japanese people are often said to be deficient in a "sense of sin." Most Japanese will admit this to be so, and they do not seem very ashamed of this either. Primitive Buddhism and the Hinayāna insist strongly upon the importance of morality, but the Mahāyāna is transcendental in its attitude to everything and indeed the difference between morality and religion lies simply in this fact, that morality is relative, things are good or bad; but religion is "beyond good and evil." So in *haiku* we have such verses as the following:

犬を打つ	Not a single stone
石のさてなし	To throw at the dog,—
冬の月	The wintry moon.
	(Taigi)

風や	The autumn storm;
二十四文の	A prostitute shack,
遊女小屋	At 24 cents a time.
	(Issa)

(10) This mark of a man of false, pretended culture is that he is subtle concerning matters to which he should have an attitude of simplicity. Eckhart, the great German mystic, says:

What God loves, that is; what God loves not, that is not.

When we read this we are not to try to define God, or love, or existence but take the simple statement in its deepest but simple meaning. Bashô's verse is to be taken in the same way:

道のべの	The Rose of Sharon
木槿は馬に	By the roadside,
くはれけり	Was eaten by the horse.
	(Bashô)

Issa has a similar but more subjective verse:

うまさうな	I could eat it!—
雪がふうわり	This snow that falls
ふうわりと	So softly, so softly.
	(Issa)

This simplicity is something special and native to the Japanese. It is seen clearly in Shintô, but also in Buddhism:

出門逢釋迦	Go out, and you meet Shâkyamuni;
入門逢彌勒	Go home, and you meet Miroku Buddha.
青山自青山	The blue hills are of themselves blue hills;
白雲自白雲	The white clouds are of themselves white clouds.
	(Zenrinkushû)

(11) The love of Buddhism and the love of Christianity are somewhat different. The love of Buddhism is selfless, not so passionate. It is closely associated with the *sabishisa* that takes away some of the energy and activity and gives it a somewhat detached, contemplative, pitying character. Christianity is love of God; Buddhism is love of the Universe, of the Devil as well as God, of *nankinmushi* and crocodiles as well as flowers and nightingales. Love begins, as always, at home:

澁いところ
母が喰ひけり
山の柿

Mountain persimmons;
The mother is eating
The astringent parts.

(Issa)

But in Issa this love goes out to all things, yet includes himself as well, for Issa rightly counts himself among the pathetic creatures struggling in this world.

The following is perhaps the most Buddhist verse ever written. It is by Issa, the most Japanese of all the Japanese who ever lived. And here Buddhism shows us the real nature of man, just as the most Japanese of men is the most human. When the last human being has disappeared from the world, the following verse should remain engraved on a shaft of bronze, a testimony to the greatness and weakness of mankind:

蚤どもも
夜永だらうぞ
淋しかろ

For you fleas too,
The night must be long,
It must be lonely.

(Issa)