

Zen in Japanese Art

日本の伝統的芸道と禅

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Abstract: 日本の禅仏教は、哲学であると同時に宗教である。それは明確にあるカテゴリーに入れたり、ラベルを貼ることはできない。論理的思考を捨てるのがこれを理解する最善の方法かもしれない。禅の「道」は多様であり、各個人によって異なるが、同時にそれはひとつでもある。日本の様々な芸道は禅理解の方法ともなる。インド・中国に理論的根拠を持ちながら、芸道家たちはそれぞれ自分の花を咲かせてきた。本論は、それら日本の伝統的芸道と禅との関りを探究したものである。

Keywords: 日本禅、道、伝統芸術。

Japanese Zen Buddhism, way, traditional arts.

Japanese Zen Buddhism is as much a philosophy as a religion. It is unable to fit precisely into some nicely labeled category for students demanding rationale.

Actually, abandoning logical thought is the best way to come to terms with it, if there can even be a “best” way. The “way” is a multi-routed path that is different for everyone, yet the same. The arts in Japan have evolved into a means for solving this koan-like oxymoron. Taking their ideological roots from China, and even India, they put the practitioner on the path and let them discover answers for themselves.

To many people, the word “Zen” conjures up images of mysticism, asceticism, and a kind of blissful satori reminiscent to perceptions of heaven. Some forms of this philosophy may contain elements of these, but the essence of it lies not in the heightened glimpse of the supernatural. No, the core of it falls closer to the accurate apprehension of reality. It does not require superhuman effort to come in contact with it, nor having a vision of some burning bush, and most certainly not somehow penetrating a bubble of esoteric dogma. In fact, Zen may be called ordinary. Quite ordinary in that it is available for all to experience, though many choose not to be aware of it. Most humans simply ignore it. Basically stated, Zen is reality. It is everything else - time, money, worry and distance that often unsettle the mind, blocking the vision of what truly exists.

Zen appears to be the refinement of Chinese Zen Buddhism blended with its cousin, Taoism. Their roots originating from the same place, Zen and Taoism have even burgeoned along similar paths. They are the realization of thought impossible to prove under the auspices of logical or rational evidence, yet just are. Seekers have a hard time finding Zen, because it is an intangible thing. This lack of hard evidence leads individuals to doubt it.

Enlightenment is nothing more than recognizing reality for what it is, or for what it's worth. There are many ways to achieve it ranging from austere behavior even to the most glamorously materialistic life style. These paths run the gamut, including things such as martial arts, fine arts, and even more mundane chores

like taking out the trash. One needs only to look to the method of *zazen* to discern the commonplace aspects of it for here instructions are to sit, and only sit. To discover the ultimate truth and to cut to the chase of existence we are asked to just be.

The most routine events can cause us to become aware of *satori*, but they seem to be as different for each person as there are snowflakes. Why is it said that the sound of a rock hitting against bamboo or solving a koan can produce enlightenment? No one knows. If one knows, then the answer is wrong and it is not Zen. Even if one perceives enlightenment because of a certain event, they don't even know why they finally attained it, even though it happened to them. When they try to replay the incident over again in their mind, it only leads to a meaningless thought somewhere over the edge of the cliff, so those that know it know it best to not try to relive it, but to live.

To achieve this state of realization, one must above all relax, letting reality open up. It is perceivable when duality is accepted in such a way so as to transcend it. Acceptance breeds the spiritual and secular manifestation of reality as they are one in the same (Brahman and atman of Hinduism). By internalizing the fact that these two things exist (i.e. good and evil), the picture is completed, and it paves a way to true being, like the insertion of the final piece of a puzzle. A realization of all the entwining weaves of the universe, as well as our insignificant role in it can be felt; but we need to let it happen naturally (*bi la kayf*) for as soon as we try to focus in on and retain the beauty it disappears.

Japanese *sumie* paintings demonstrate this thought for us in temporal terms. Like Daoism and Buddhism, *sumie* filtered over to Japan from China, and the Japanese added their own touches to it. Japanese students even traveled to China to study for years before returning home to hone the art in Japanese terms. Therefore, it seems appropriate to use terms from Chinese art to describe *sumie* painting as sometimes the meaning of the Japanese *kanji* is identical to its Chinese counterpart. *Sumie* not only caught on with artists, who mimicked the great landscape paintings of the Sung dynasty, but the paintings were prized by collectors ranging from the members of the imperial court to commoners.

Many famous warriors also painted *sumie*. One of the most prominent swordsmen in the history of Japan, Musashi, forged exquisite *sumie* paintings once he was retired from fighting. His *Koboku-meigeki-zu* or a “Japanese Shrike Shrieking on a Leafless Tree” is one such articulate work.

An untrained eye may find this painting boring in that it appears vacant, ordinary, and empty, but this is just where its appeal lies: lost in quietude, enveloped in ubiquitous tranquility (*tan*) and removed of bric-a-brac clutter. It embodies *sabi*. The solitary bird perched atop the single brush stroke that acts as a tree is so Zen-like that it could be the reincarnation of Dharma, but instead of staring out at a cave wall, it looks out into great marshy vastness which is essentially what Dharma practiced. The bird in the painting even appears to be in a state of meditation.

The bird and tree jut up into the sky of nothingness (*kung*) en plaine air, and the blank space lends importance and enormity to what appears to be the central focus of the painting. More emptiness in the painting than ink, the void of the sky echoes the Zen sentiment of evacuating the mind to let enlightenment pierce the self. From a yin-yang concept asymmetrical balance is in place as the sky is countered by the darkness of the ink at the bottom. We also see this balance between the dark ink at the bottom left and the grayer ink that is the pond.

Not only does the sky play the role of emptiness, but also the pond continues this motif. Traditionally, in myths and fairy tales, ponds have served metaphorically as the abyss of the psyche, a place all humans must venture and come to terms with before they are allowed to grow as a person. The psychology of Zen has much to say about such concepts, and we find a solid representation of it as Musashi's pond ripples off into infinity with the contemplative bird looking on. This exemplifies the kind of inner serenity that is evident in Zen, as well as in Chinese, Hindu, and even Christian doctrine, hence demonstrating the universal human spirit. Holistically, it's a stable work procuring harmony with the void as opposed to fear of it.

Many lines in the painting, though consisting of a single brush stroke, seem to explode with life (*Ku fa*). Most notably teeming with energy is the main tree branch that supports the bird. The bough bends from the light weight of the bird (*li*) and we witness the delicate strength of the branch that dictates the fine

balance between our corporeal world and the afterlife of death. This giving or going with strength and not challenging it is a fundamental concept in the martial arts, and we get a feel for how pliancy has more power than stiffness, like Herrigel's "snow falling from a bamboo leaf". The symbiotic relationship between the bird and the branch yield a win-win attitude: The bird gets a resting place, and the tree gets exercise. If the bird were to fly away, wouldn't the branch bounce to and fro a bit before settling into place? Why can we this be seen? It is the genius of the painter?

This life-like depiction of reality with single lines is also found in other places (*Ku fa*): The feet, tail and chest of the bird, the top tips of the main branch and the "other" branch in the middle of the painting. Bolder lines are employed to make the rippling effect for the pond as it settles off into outer space (*li*).

Like in China, landscapes were a common theme for Japanese painters. Roads or paths in paintings were a common theme. This represents the "do" philosophy of judo, shodo, or aikido. Often loosely translated as "path", "road", or "way", as attempts are relatively inaccurate. Digging deeper, this "way" is a methodology for living, for carving out life as an artistic expression of *joie de vivre*. It is to view the ordinary as the exceptional, but it doesn't stop here. This path has many trials and tribulations, and those who have walked it before must teach those ignorant ones how to safely avoid the hazards. Here is selflessness, here is emptiness and the abandonment of all thoughts, and here is where it eludes to Zen.

Haiku poetry follows in the tradition of something small that provides a powerful punch. It could be likened to the taste of *wasabi*, but those unfamiliar with it tend to feel it somewhat incomplete or dissatisfied like when eating only one bite of a sandwich or a tiny morsel of chocolate. Through advanced study, those who dislike it may at least come to appreciate it. Like a Zen koan, its pattern is simple yet challenging, its meaning obvious yet elusive.

This autumn.

How old I am getting:

Ah, the clouds, the birds! 1

This Basho poem of autumn resounds with Zen. Traditionally, the fall season is regarded as a melancholic time of passing into old age, and it literally faces us in this poem. Reflections of old age are common thoughts that all humans must ponder at one time or another. Sometimes it is a wonder exactly who that person in the mirror really is, and this is without question the topic of contemplation here. Basho's quick turn from possible self-pity to the rapture of clouds and birds catapults him out of a sorrowful stage and back into the events of the moment. Enjoying the art of nature is living in the present, and indicative of the empty mind spoken so highly of in Zen.

Like the void of the *sumie* paintings, the ambiguous words "clouds" and "birds" conjure subjective interpretations of them. What kinds of clouds are seen? Are they puffy white ones or long and narrow? What kinds of birds are there? Are they

perched on a branch or flying South in formation? Can their songs be heard or is it silent? The elegance is that individual people all have different answers, but they stem from one thing. Could this be a hidden metaphor for the fact that human beings all have separate bodies, but belong to the same cosmic consciousness?

The most notable Zen concept in the poem is that of cycles. The changing of the seasons relates to the idea that everything is in constant flux, and is a metaphor for reincarnation. This thought is permeated with Zen as so much poetry talks about the cycles of years, days and lives. Old and young are the same thing just as lightness and darkness, and yin and yang are. It is like looking at the front of your hand and the back of your hand, they are different but it is still one hand. The American idiom “Two sides of the same coin” fits this. To fully comprehend this idea, one needs to understand the aforementioned equation of void - earthly life - void. Things just don’t finish at the time of death, and Basho admits this to himself by dispelling his thought of worry and enjoying the moment.

Loath to let spring go,

Birds cry, and even fishes’

Eyes are wet with tears. 2

This Basho poem was written as he was departing on a long journey. It is marked with many classical elements of Zen, redolent with the lighter or more comic side of things. It is reminiscent of the anxiety of seeing a friend off at the airport or train station. There is an awkward period of time after the goodbyes have been said, but

the transportation hasn't arrived where no one knows quite what to say, and it has an aura of nervous energy surrounding it. At this time people usually try to make light of the situation with some sort of inadequate joke. This phenomenon has led many people to insist that they be dropped off in front of airports or train stations.

Basho, on the other hand, takes advantage of this to sarcastically poke fun at just such sentimental thought. He eloquently points to the nonexistent tears of birds, and more ridiculously sheds upon us the image of a crying fish. Totally illogical, this weeping fish picture is as perplexing to mentally construct as a Zen koan. When imagining this how can one tell where the fish's tears start and the ocean begins or vice versa? This remark is so witty that it sparks joyful laughter. On a deeper level, the tear could be the "drop in the ocean" that a human soul is thought to be.

Representing youth and vitality, no one likes to see spring pass. For it only demarcates the inevitable coming of the sweltering heat of summer, leading to the maudlin feel of fall. The reference of the season falls in line with the cyclical thought that was mentioned earlier on seasons with its never ending movement ticking away the seconds.

Historically, the Japanese shakuhachi was a hierarchial instrument. Buddhist monks taught each other to play in temples without written scores as the tunes were handed from teacher to student through training only. Each temple had only

one song that in its entirety would last from about five to ten minutes, but would take years to master. Often, teachers would sit in the dark with their pupils, and they would teach without the aid of sight.

Playing shakuhachi became a form of meditation. Engrossed in repetition and focused on breathing, the musician would lose himself in emptiness, and sound would protrude based on natural breathing in somewhat of a miraculous achievement. Producing notes requires no labored breaths, but concentrates on usual inhaling and exhaling. In fact too strong a breath won't generate a sound. Players were taught to relax in such a way that if the instrument were swiped away while playing they would just to continue breath normally as if nothing happened.

The really dignified thing about the shakuhachi is that it depends on the very thing that gives us life for its sound . Breathing is something we take for granted, but there is a proper way to do it. Most people only use about 50% of the capacity of their lungs. The shakuhachi is healthy in that it not only induces a cathartic musical effect, but also teaches the right way of breathing, and centeredness. This cultivates psychological and physical well-being. Additional oxygen in our bodies makes for clearer intelligence, stronger muscles, and better health all the way around.

Many shakuhachi scores are like haiku poetry. They are short, often punctiliously strict, and contain traditional Zen themes such as cycles, seasons, yin-yang ideas,

and nature. In many ways the sounds pay tribute to nature (*tzu zan*). Wind and waves can make natural music, but man-made compositions are sacrifices for the gods, as sound floats majestically to heaven. Notes are sometimes held for the entire duration of one whole breath, a time frame that can make a Westerner balloon with anxiety while waiting for something to happen. This wait may in fact be a while as the unostentatious pace of shakuhachi music is usually slow and drawn out.

The shakuhachi's perishable product lives in the here and now of Zen. There is no way to hang the music on the wall, or display it in a showcase. Tunes have an asymmetrical balance like *sumie* paintings or rock gardens, and many of them are the severe refinement of a very few notes, carrying with them a simplicity that breeds relaxation. Silence is considered a virtue and is employed as part of the music, as in Zen where there is something in nothing(*kung*). This is reminiscent of yogic chanting where A-U-M has a space of meaningful silence between the next "AUM." Even one sound is highly valued, and be it good or bad the Buddha is thought to still appreciate it. The music can transport the listener to another plane of spiritual existence, and cause one to forget the body completely. Unfortunately, many modern Japanese find it boring, and there are very few people who play shakuhachi today. The important thing to remember is this: Shakuhachi is a feeling more than music.

A real shakuhachi is usually made completely from organic materials. It is simply a certain length of bamboo cut to a certain size. The rarity lies in not only finding

this special size, but in the process it takes to make one. It is said that only one of the proper size in one hundred will survive the drying procedure, and only one in a thousand will make it to the finishing stage. Consequently, these “pieces of wood” start at about \$1000, and the good ones cost much, much more.

In North Americans lies something very akin to the shakuhachi. Flute music of the Plains Indians has a similar tone, and many other like veins. It is made from cedar, and was used to induce soothing relaxation, in the courting of woman, and in healing by Shaman. It comes from a long tradition of ancient songs handed down from past teachers, but is also undergoing some change at the moment as some artists are experimenting with a new style by amalgamating it with modern technology.

Indian flute music conjures up images of nature and often pays homage to the same things that shakuhachi music does: seasons, solstices, and the praise of nature. Both seem to create the image of a harmonious relationship with nature as opposed to the struggle against it. Indian philosophy is in line with Zen in regards to afterlife as well - believing that the soul returns to the source, it's easy to draw comparisons between the two.

There is a slight tonal difference, but pace is the major discrepancy between them. Shakuhachi music seems to be at a slower one, not paying attention to anyone's definition of time. Coming from the open plains, desert and Grand Canyon areas, and the Indian flute gives off a faster feel that pulsates with wide expanses. As we

listen images of the big sky tumbling on into eternity is something that somehow pervades the music. Conversely, the shakuhachi doesn't cover such wide ground as it typifies the smallness of so many things in Japan like houses, streets, and the land itself for rarely is there a huge bunch of prairie without small mountains (or skyscrapers now) in the way. Japanese have always been fascinated with miniature things, and this cultural point bleeds through in shakuhachi music.

Japanese arts and Zen are inextricably bound. Any art contains aspects of the philosophy, and all that is necessary to realize this is to look. This paper glanced into how Zen saturates certain arts by isolating specific examples in *sumie*, haiku, shakuhachi,; but any other Japanese art would have been a fine model. The common factor seemed to boil down to the emptying of the mind, and the entrance into a repetitive, meditative state that blends body and mind invoking a feeling of transcending secular duality. It appears to take on a subjective nature, and not only varies for each individual person, but has a most indescribable air. Due to the tremendous influence that Zen has in Japanese arts, it underlies the daily action, attitude and culture of Japanese denizens without them even realizing it. Perhaps this causes the curvature of a smile to form most approvingly on the countenance of the Buddha .

End Notes

1. Blyth, R.H., *Haiku Volume 3 Summer - Autumn*, (Tokyo, Hokuseido Press, 1952), P. 895

2. Basho, *Narrow Road To a Far Province*, Trans. by Dorothy Britton, (New York, Kodansha, 1974), P.30

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