

## SORROW AND BLOSSOMS: THE POETRY OF SAIGYŌ

David Landis Barnhill

The poetry of the monk-poet Saigyō has been revered in Japan for 800 years. He has been considered particularly important because he is both a part of Heian court poetry and the medieval Buddhist poetic tradition. The complexity of his poetry has given rise to a wide variety of not only interpretations but also methods of interpretations. In this section we will pursue an issue that can be one of the most important focuses for the discovery of religious meaning: the question of religious success. What kind of experience is embodied in the poems, and do they suggest the fulfillment of religious ideals or a falling short? We will not be able to establish a definitive interpretation of Saigyō's religiosity or even of individual poems in these few pages. But by examining the themes of attachment, emotions, nature, and the self, we can get at least an initial sense of the complexity involved in examining religious experience and success in Saigyō's poetry.

Attachment--grasping for things one desires--is a central part of the Buddhist notion of suffering; it is a major obstacle to liberation. Emotions such as sadness are often taken as signs of attachment: sorrow comes because what we desire passes away; if one was not attached, why would one ever be sad? For most Buddhists the ultimate goal is release from all attachments, and with them the notion of a self (perhaps the ultimate object of attachment). Such a state is often depicted as a calm equanimity that remains undisturbed by any occurrence or situation.

Such views are the context for one of Saigyō's most famous poems (SKKS 362, SKS 515/470).<sup>1</sup>

<i>Kokoro naki</i>	Even to one
<i>mi ni mo aware wa</i>	free of passions such pathos
<i>shirarekeri</i>	would be apparent.
<i>shigi tatsu sawa no</i>	A marsh where a snipe rises
<i>aki no yūgure</i>	into autumn evening.

It is dusk: day is fading into night as autumn is fading into winter. As light and color dissolve a bird flies up and disappears. It is a somber yet powerful moment of impermanence with the stark but striking beauty favored by the poets of Saigyō's time.

Before we encounter this scene, however, we read an intriguing statement. It is in the form of a denial of conventional expectations: we would think that someone who is *kokoro naki* would not feel sorrow, but we are told that in fact even such a person would feel *aware* here. The first line literally reads "without a heart." *Kokoro*, however, has various meanings: heart, mind, feeling, passions, compassion, etc. The phrase *kokoro nashi* itself has several meanings, including "without compassion" and "devoid of cultivated sensitivity"--with negative connotations--and also "free of passions," an ideal for a Buddhist monk. The poem thus might be suggesting that such a scene is so powerful that it would move even someone lacking aesthetic sensibilities.<sup>2</sup> It also might be suggesting that even a Buddhist who has freed himself from his passions would feel sorrow at such a moment.<sup>3</sup> Of course one should always keep in mind the possibility of combining such alternative readings.

Let us pursue the second, Buddhist interpretation. Is the poem implying that even someone who has become free of passions is still trapped in attachment, thus feeling sorrow at the passing of things? If so, the poem is pessimistic and suggests a kind of religious failure. But perhaps the poem suggests that when we have removed the passions that are a manifestation of attachment, a particular kind of sorrow remains. According to this interpretation, Buddhist liberation does not imply cold detachment but rather a sensitivity to the profound pathos of existence experienced within abiding equanimity. In fact, much of Japanese religious aesthetics involves tranquil sorrow.

The value Saigyō placed on such tranquil sorrow can be seen in another verse (SKS 1019/937).

<i>Tou hito mo</i>	No longer hoping
<i>omoitaetaru</i>	for visitors to come--
<i>yamazato no</i>	this mountain village:
<i>sabishisa nakuba</i>	were there no loneliness
<i>sumiukaramashi</i>	life here would be misery

The key term here is *sabishisa*, "loneliness," a term we will encounter again in our discussion of Bashō's *hokku*. In the poem, *sabishisa* is distinguished from misery, which is avoided by the presence of this special kind of loneliness. For Saigyō (as for Bashō), loneliness was an ideal state, sorrowful yet devoid of the wrenching, disturbed emotion of misery.

Saigyō cultivated the sensibility of sorrow, and nature was a principal context for such aesthetic development (SKS 83/72).

<i>Hana chirade</i>	Were the world without
<i>tsuki wa kumoran</i>	falling blossoms
<i>yo nariseba</i>	or the clouded moon,
<i>mono o omowan</i>	I could no longer live
<i>waga mi naramashi</i>	in sad longing.

The term *mono o omou* is often used in reference to longing for one's loved one, but here the meaning is more general. This melancholy is something he prizes, and it is both maintained and refined by exposure to the impermanence of nature and the somber beauty of a clouded moon.

Saigyō's poetry, however, does not uniformly present experiences of such quiescent sorrow. Some poems point to a struggle with attachment (SKKS 1831; SKS 797/729).

<i>Nanigoto ni</i>	When this heart
<i>tomaru kokoro no</i>	becomes attached
<i>arikereba</i>	to some thing:
<i>sara ni shimo mata</i>	now--yet again--
<i>yo no itowashiki</i>	so hateful is the world

In the context of Buddhist attitudes toward attachment, poems such as these suggest a difficult, even bitter, spiritual struggle.

Attachment was clearly an issue Saigyō wrestled with, but his response was not "de-tachment," a withdrawal from involvement. Some his poems about blossoms involve a subtle reinterpretation of the notion of attachment (SKS 77/66).

<i>Yoshino yama</i>	Mount Yoshino:
<i>kozue no hana o</i>	from that day I saw
<i>mishi hi yori</i>	those blossom branches,
<i>kokoro wa mi ni mo</i>	my heart has been gone
<i>sowazunariniki</i>	from my self.

One could read the poem as a painful song of attachment: from the first I have been attached to the blossoms, so much that I have lived a torn life. Wherever my body (*mi*) may go, my heart (*kokoro*) remains grasping at this beauty, my feelings at odds with my self. Some commentators see the poem suggesting a split between the aesthetic, beauty-loving (and craving) *kokoro* and the Buddhist renunciant *mi*.<sup>4</sup>

Another poem seems, at least at first reading, to confirm this "negative" view towards Saigyō's love of blossoms (SKKS 126; SKS 131/120).

<i>nagamu tote</i>	Gazing at them, immersed,
<i>hana ni mo itaku</i>	I become so intimate
<i>narenureba</i>	with the blossoms;
<i>chiru wakere koso</i>	and with the falling away
<i>kanashikarikere</i>	and scattering comes sorrow.

This can be read as a classic statement of attachment as well as the suffering that inevitably results from it in an impermanent world. But given the complexity of Saigyō's poetry and his tendency to play with our expectations, it is wise to be open to subtle alternative interpretations.

In the first line, the verb *nagamu* suggests both gazing at a wide expanse and being deeply immersed in meditative thought. Saigyō seems to be absorbed in contemplation of the blossoms and as a result has become "very intimate" with them. It should be remembered that one general type of meditation in Buddhism was concentration on a visual object, a "moon-disk" being one important example.<sup>5</sup> The first three lines thus could be read as suggesting an intense form of visual meditation which allows Saigyō to merge with the blossoms, to lose his "self" and the subject/object split that is at the root of delusion and desire.<sup>6</sup>

The fourth line is literally "it is the falling away and scattering," the word *chiru* associated with the scattering of blossoms and *wakare* presumably meaning their separation from the branches. But again we have more than one possible interpretation. The poem could be suggesting that while his meditation on the blossoms had engendered a contemplative union with them, as they fall, the meditative union is broken and there is a separation between him and the blossoms, resulting in regret. But then we must remember that at least one kind of sorrow (seen in terms such as *aware*, *sabishisa*, and *mono o omou*) is presented as an ideal state, a tranquil sadness at the pathos of life that comes with Saigyō's Buddhist realization. Perhaps the falling and separation refers not only to the scattering of blossoms but to the sloughing off of the self, the full release of the ego and the delusion of separation from the world. If this is the case, with the falling away of the self comes Buddhist insight, including the realization of the pathos of impermanent beauty.

If this reading is valid, perhaps the statement in the previous poem that his heart has become identified with the blossoms and separated from his self is not a testimony of a religious failure. Perhaps instead it is a declaration of an abiding union maintained wherever his body may go. Such an unconventional and positive view of intimacy with blossoms can be found in other poems of the period, and a discussion of one of them helps to throw light on Saigyō's poetry and suggest that the subtlety of Saigyō's understanding of Buddhism can be found elsewhere in the Shinkokinshū period. The following poem is by the court poetess Kojijū and entitled "The Heart of the Heart Sutra" (SKKS 1937).

<i>iro ni nomi</i>	The heart dyed only
<i>someshi kokoro no</i>	in the colors of the world:
<i>kuyashiki o</i>	its regret is turned
<i>munashi to tokeru</i>	to joy as the Buddha's Law
<i>nori no ureshisa</i>	resolves it all as emptiness

The word *iro* means "color" in Japanese, but it is also the word used for the Buddhist term "form" (*shiki*). *Munashi* can mean "vain," but the same word pronounced differently is *kû*, emptiness, the Buddhist term for ultimate reality. The Heart Sutra is most famous for a statement that identifies emptiness with the phenomenal world: "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." Given this context, a conventional interpretation of the poem might read the poem as suggesting that being dyed in the colors or forms of the world is vain because colors are illusory and form is empty of reality. In this interpretation, the ideal would be to go beyond such distress-causing distractions and attachments.

But a new interpretation arises if we put this poem fully in the context of the "heart" of the Heart Sutra--the idea that form is nothing other than emptiness and emptiness is nothing other than form. Grammatically, the object of the verb *toku* ("explain," translated here as the transitive verb "to resolve") is actually the regret felt ("*kuyashiki*"), not the condition of being dyed: it is the regret that is vain. According to a conventional interpretation of the poem, this grammatical structure makes little sense and has been ignored. But in terms of the heart of the Heart Sutra, it makes a great deal of sense. If one has achieved a meditative immersion in the world's colors/forms and realized the truth that the world's colors/forms are nothing other than emptiness, then what could there be to regret? Being dyed in the colors of the phenomenal world is to be in a state of meditative unity with emptiness itself.<sup>7</sup>

One poem by Saigyô similarly refers to the experience of blossoms, color, and being dyed, and it indicates how, at least in some poems, intimacy with blossoms involved not attachment but liberation (SKS 1956/---).

<p><i>Omoikaesu</i>  <i>satori ya kyô wa</i>  <i>nakaramashi</i>  <i>hana ni someoku</i>  <i>iro nakari</i></p>	<p>Mind-changing  satori--this very day--  it would not exist  had my own color  not been dyed by blossoms</p>
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The poem literally reads "...had color not been dyed by blossoms," and *iro* could actually refer to two things: his own form, his being, and the form of the phenomenal world as a whole. In his contemplative immersion in blossoms he achieved a unitary experience in which his very self was dyed in blossoms. Both the word "dye" and, attached to it, the auxiliary verb *oku* (which implies a continuing state) suggest that this experience was not momentary but abiding--it was with him wherever he went. Thus any unitary contemplation of reality would involve this "blossom heart" and the whole of phenomenal reality of forms would take on this color of blossoms. This long-standing intimacy with--indeed union with--blossoms has led to this day's awakening.

A discussion of more of Saigyô's poems would lead to a refinement of this basic interpretation, but we leave that up to the reader. One danger in focusing on the issue of religious success is the tendency to expect a simple answer: his poems embody either success or failure. It seems wiser, however, to consider the possibility that some of his poems suggest religious success, others spiritual frustration, and still others are ambiguous enough to suggest both a conventional and a more subtle reading that diverges from the conventional. In this way we can retain an openness to the complexity of Saigyô's experience.

## ENDNOTES

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1. SKKS refers to the *Shinkokinshū*, with the standard numbering given. SKS refers to the *Sankashū*, with the first number referring to Watanabe Tamotsu's *Sankashū zenchūkai*, (Tokyo: Kasama shobō, 1971), the second to the number in standard editions of the *Shinkokinshū*, such as the one edited by Gotō Shigeo (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1982).
  2. This interpretation seems to guide the translation by Geoffrey Bownas and Anthony Thwaite in *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1964): "A man without feelings,/even, would know sadness/When snipe start from the marshes/On an autumn evening" (p. 100).
  3. Keene (*Anthology of Japanese Literature* [New York: Grove, 1955], 195), LaFleur (*Mirror for the Moon* [New York: New Directions, 1978], 24), and Watson (*Saigyō: Poems of a Mountain Home* [New York: Columbia UP, 1991], 81) use the phrase "free of passions," while Brower and Miner use the phrase "While denying his heart,/Even a priest..." (*Introduction to Japanese Court Poetry* [Stanford: Stanford UP, 1968], 103). The distinction between Bownas and Thwaite's seemingly "aesthetic" interpretation and these "religious" interpretations may reflect the fact that Saigyō can be (and has been) read principally as a Heian court poet who happened to be a monk or a medieval recluse monk who wrote poetry.
  4. LaFleur translates "Now my body knows the absence/Even of its own heart" (5) while Takagi Kiyoko renders it "My heart has been at odds/With priestly me" ("Saigyō: A Search for Religion," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 4 (1977): 69).
  5. Yamada Shozen has suggested that Saigyō's gazing at the moon (in the sky) is a development of this type of meditation. If so, it is not unlikely that Saigyō used the blossoms in a similarly meditational way.
  6. See Konishi Jin'ichi, *A History of Japanese Literature*, vol. III (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 199, for a discussion Teika's poetry as involving Tendai Buddhist meditation on blossoms.
  7. See David Pollack, *The Fracture of Meaning: Japan's Synthesis of China from Eighth through the Eighteenth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1986), pages 101 and 104 for a different interpretation. I am indebted to him for the translation of *toku* as "resolves it all."