YŪGEN AND THE POETICS OF THE SHINKOKINSHŪ PERIOD

The Shinkokinshū period was marked by a significantly new—and religiously significant—set of poetic ideas. Yūen (refined charm), yōen (ethereal beauty), yojō (overtones?), ushin (depth of heart), kanjaku (tranquil desolation), and especially yūgen were poetic ideals that dominated Japanese poetry during this period, and many continued to be important throughout the medieval period as a whole. Each of these terms is difficult to define, and their meanings evolved over time and even differed among poets of this era. Two words, however, suggest the general character of the new poetics of the period: subtlety and depth.

The poetry of the Shinkokinshū period exemplified a subtlety of expression. A poem with yūgen and yūen is suggestive rather than declarative; its meaning is indeterminate and its beauty is found in emotional overtones and an indefinable atmosphere. Yojō in particular signified the subtle, indefinable reverberations of meaning in a poem. Shinkokinshū poetics also involved a subtlety of beauty. The refined charm of yūen involved quiet elegance and polish. Yūgen, is marked by a subdued, serene beauty rather than the splendor of cherry blossoms or scarlet leaves at their peak. Kanjaku, an ideal that begins to be seen in the twelfth century but becomes prominent in the thirteenth, includes a sense of the lonely, austere beauty of a stag's cry in autumn wind. (Konishi II:61-62, Jakuren) As a result, while there is a refinement and loftiness of tone in Shinkokinshū poetry, they are typically combined with simplicity and even austerity.

The subtlety of beauty was matched by emotional subtlety. Yūgen and kanjaku, for instance, tend to involve a quiet melancholy. But calm signifies not lack of emotion but quiet depth. The phrase kokoro fukaki ("profundity of heart") was a common one in poetic criticism, and the term ushin ("possessing heart") pointed to intensity of feeling, however tranquil.

But we will miss the subtlety and depth of the vision involved in a term such as yūgen if we confine ourselves to purely aesthetic ideas and emotional content. The poetry of the Shinkokinshū period developed within a Buddhistic religio-aesthetic context and the poetics of the period cannot be examined solely in literary terms. In order to begin to understand the religious depth and subtlety of the Shinkokinshū poetics, we need to first outline some of the aspects of a central Buddhist concept: nondualism.

NONDUALITY IN BUDDHISM

Actually, it may be more accurate to call nonduality the underlying disposition of the kind of Buddhism that influenced the Shinkokinshū poets. A wide variety of aspects of Buddhist thought, experience, and practice partake of nonduality, and in various ways. We can begin to see this nonduality by considering a meditative technique, shikan, promoted by Tendai Buddhism and used by the poets Shunzei and Teika. Shikan has two basic
aspects: the concentrating and stilling (shi) of the mind, which allows insight (kan) into the true nature of reality. While there are various forms of shikan, the principal activity is contemplation on a particular object such that the distractions and hyperactive busyness of the mind are quieted. A state of pure concentration on the object results, characterized by a state of total immersion in which "object and consciousness are one" (kyōchi funi). For one in such a state, there is no longer the experience of a self contemplating an object "out there." There is only: object. One can get a partial sense of this experience by listening to music with earphones in a darkened room, so rapt in the music that there is no longer any sense of oneself hearing the music. There is only: music. This dissolution of subject and object in a unitary experience is part of the Buddhist doctrine of muga (Skt: anatman), "nonself," one of the Three Characteristics of Existence: there is no self separate from the object of experience.

Such a nonduality of consciousness and reality also involves the experience of the nonduality of reality itself. We might call this "metaphysical" nonduality, but we should keep in mind that we are ultimately concerned with a particular type of experience rather than a system of philosophic ideas. The most basic term in Mahayana metaphysics is emptiness. The world is empty not because it lacks reality but because it lacks "thingness": separate, independent existence. The common sense duality between an entity and the rest of the world is replaced by the affirmation of radical interdependence and even interpenetration among all things. "Things" exist not as discrete entities but as nodes of relationships. As there is no psychological gap between consciousness and object in shikan, in emptiness there is no ontological gap between one thing (including one's "self") and another. The notion that reality is empty of self-subsistent thingness is another aspect of the Buddhist notion of nonself.

Tendai Buddhism expanded on this notion of emptiness with the doctrine of the Three Truths: emptiness (kū), relative reality (ke), and the middle (chū). Emptiness is a truth, but we must avoid taking emptiness to mean either that existence lacks reality or that emptiness is some kind of reality in itself. Thus the second truth: the world we live in is real—though in a relative, interdependent way. Only by affirming the middle which integrates the first two truths can we see reality as it is.

Several implications of nonduality have been particularly important in East Asian Buddhism. First, things don't exist by themselves; they "interexist." Reality is a web of interdependent reality. The world is neither made of discrete atoms of existence, nor is it some undifferentiated monistic One. Trees and clouds are distinct, and yet fundamentally (not secondarily) they interpenetrate each other's existence. Thus Buddhism can claim that each thing is distinguishable from all other things yet, in a sense, each thing "is" all other things.

A second implication follows directly on the first two. If reality is radically interdependent, and if there is no distinction between self and world, then what is there?
One vast, endless interwoven reality. Since there is no boundary between self and world, between thing and thing, enlightened consciousness is characterized by a strong experience of boundlessness. The notion of depth is appropriate here, for the experience of the vastness of the interpenetrating world amounts to a kind of unlimited horizontal depth, as in the phrase "deep in the mountains."

In addition to the notion of the interweaving of phenomena, a third implication is the interpenetration of ultimate reality with the natural world we live in. We often associate religious depth in literature with intimations of a reality beyond or beneath this one. But in nondualistic Buddhism, ultimate reality is not some transcendent realm. In the famous words of the Heart Sutra, "form is emptiness and emptiness is form." The world of forms we see and touch is nothing other than ineffable ultimate reality, and that sacred reality is found only here, not in the natural world but as the natural world. Again the notion of depth applies. Phenomenal reality is deep not because it points to a noumenal reality above or below this world but because phenomenal reality is wholly continuous with the Absolute.

A fourth implication is that there is a radical equality among things. We tend to see life in terms of hierarchies: within society, between the human and the natural world, within nature. But if reality is radically interpenetrating, such hierarchical distinctions are undercut. Every "thing," interwoven with every other "thing," is of equal--and unbounded--value.

So far we have been discussing the nonduality "between" things. There is also a nonduality "within" things. In the West we have tended to make a distinction between existence and essence. Often religion is portrayed as a search for essences, and depth is usually thought of as going beneath the surface to an essence. But such a dichotomy ultimately has no place in nondualistic Buddhism. Our distinction between existence and essence parallels our distinction between the natural world and the transcendent, divine world. In nondualistic Buddhism, there is neither a separate, sacred reality nor an essence underlying existence. Instead, there are simply things "as they are," interexisting as a boundless web and as the ineffable Absolute. The only significant dichotomy for Buddhism is between seeing reality with the delusion of self/other and thing/thing, and seeing it nondualistically, and thus seeing things in their interpenetrating "suchness" that can't be grasped in language and thought. This kind of subtlety of vision involves not a glimpse at some underlying essence but rather a clarity of mind that sees an unbounded reality with a bottomless quietude.

These aspects of nondualism also have at least two major implications concerning language. It had long been a tendency in Buddhism (not only Zen but Tendai as well) to suggest that the character of enlightenment cannot be described in words. In addition, if the natural world is ineffable ultimate reality, then any attempt to grasp reality in words ultimately fails. Language is inherently dualistic, reality ultimately nondualistic. Yet
conversely there is, potentially at least, a positive aspect that arises out of such metaphysics. If form is itself emptiness, perhaps concrete images can at least indirectly suggest ultimate reality.

A second implication concerns the notion of symbol. Traditional Western religious notions of symbol parallel our traditional metaphysics: as there is a split between the natural and transcendent realms, and existence and essence, so is there a split between the symbol (e.g., word or picture) and its symbolic meaning. A dove is meaningful in conventional Christianity because it stands for something else: peace. But in nondualistic Buddhism in which ultimate reality and the natural world are coextensive and in which the goal is not a relationship to a transcendent realm but a new way of experiencing this world, the meaning of an image is the image itself—experienced in a particular way. The snipe rising in Saigyō’s *kokoro naki* poem does not stand for something else. It rather suggests a particular kind of experience of the world as not only form and beauty but as the boundless, ineffable Absolute. The meaning of a poem with a snipe rising from a marsh is a particular tone and mode of experiencing the world of snipes and marshes.

**NONDUALITY IN SHINKOKINSHŪ POETRY AND POETICS**

*Shinkokinshū* poetics developed within this kind of religious context. Both Shunzei and Teika, for instance, made direct references to nondualistic doctrines and practices in their writings. In his treatise *Korai füteishō*, Shunzei quotes a Tendai Buddhist who said "Calm-and-contemplation [*shikan*] has in itself a clarity and tranquility beyond anything known to earlier generations." Shunzei himself states that "things that otherwise are incapable of being expressed in words will be understood precisely when they are likened to calm-and-contemplation." "I can now for the record state that the Japanese lyric called the *uta* has a dimension of depth, one that has affinity with the three stages of Truth in Tendai."

In the *Maigetsushō*, attributed to Teika, the stillness and immersion of *shikan* is presented as a prerequisite of significant poetry. Speaking of the *ushin* style (that which has deep *kokoro*, or "heart"), the author states that "A poet who approaches it with a wavering mind will never be able to compose in the *ushin* style. Only after meticulously purifying the heart and entering into a single sphere [*kyō*, a Tendai term for the object of contemplation] can one compose *ushin* poetry...."

The kind of poetry that emerges from this approach is exemplified by the following poems. The first is the poem by Shunzei he himself singled out for praise, the second by Teika, placed in the *Shinkokinshū* along side Saigyō’s *kokoro naki* verse.

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yū sareba
nobe no akikaze
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As evening falls,  
the autumn wind of the fields
mi ni shimite pierces my flesh,
uzura naku nari the quails crying
fukakusa no sato by the village of Deep Plants

miwataseba I gaze out:
hana mo momiji mo no cherry blossoms
nakarikeri or scarlet maple leaves--
ura no tomaya no grass huts by a bay
aki no yūgure in autumn evening

The "literary" aspects of Shinkokinshū subtlety and depth--tranquil, subdued beauty, with a sense of vastness, desolation, and sorrow--are directly related to Buddhism's nondualistic vision. For instance, the fusing of subject and object found in shikan meditation requires a stillness of mind that Shunzei and Teika saw as the basis of poetic vision. Such tranquility is drawn to and reflected in the subdued, serene beauty of the poems quoted above. Similarly, we could say that it is precisely the contemplation of quiet beauty that permits and engenders a clear tranquility of religious vision. Cherry blossoms or scarlet leaves may be striking, but their surface splendor can distract us from the awareness of the ultimate character of the natural world. The colors are not illusory, but they may lead to delusion and attachment. A poet of yūgen and kanjaku will seek out a scene of subtle beauty for it allows and catalyzes the vision of the absolute dimension of the phenomenal world.

The subtlety of this beauty is reinforced by the egalitarianism and inclusiveness of the nondualistic vision. The conventional hierarchy of the beautiful and the ordinary is undercut by Buddhist metaphysics, and what would normally seem unassuming is felt to be profoundly beautiful. Thus a grass thatched hut by a bay in autumn evening becomes an object of aesthetic appreciation and contemplation.

With the conventional boundaries of beauty expanded, the Buddhist view of the interpenetration of mundane and ultimate reality leads to a predilection for a darker beauty. Ultimate reality is this world of forms, yet is not exhausted by our normal apprehension of the visible world and is in that sense "dark." The kind of depth involved here--the noumenal dimension of the phenomenal world--is evoked by a scenes such as a snipe rising into autumn darkness or a grass hut at dusk.

The increasingly monochrome aesthetic of the Shinkokinshū period also suggests Buddhism's vision of the boundlessness of reality. Someone whose vision stops at bright colors may for that reason be kept from awareness of the vastness of reality. Kamo no Chōmei tried to suggest the nature of yūgen with these words: "On an autumn evening, for example, there is no color in the sky, and although we cannot give a definite reason for it, we are somehow moved to tears. A person lacking in sensitivity finds nothing peculiar in such a sight; he just admires the cherry blossoms and scarlet autumn leaves that he can see..."
with his own eyes." It is a colorless sky that best suggests the unboundedness of reality: our vision is not arrested by surface attractiveness. In addition, the sky is a particularly appropriate image. The endless, overarching, and empty space of the sky suggests an all-inclusive reality, and as we have seen, the words sky and Buddhist emptiness are written with the same Chinese character.

Chômei’s quote raises an important issue: why does the *Shinkokinshû* sense of beauty tend toward the melancholy? The tranquil sorrow of *yûgen* and *kanjaku* arises in part from the impermanence of things. In the Buddhist aesthetic vision, not only the beauty of things is seen and intensely felt; so is their transience. The tone of this *mujô-kan* (the feeling of impermanence) in the *Shinkokinshû* is darker than what is typically found in earlier periods of Japanese literature. The "passing away and going out" seems to be closer at hand, like an everpresent shadow. Life is seen on the verge of extinction. The many poems of the era that ended with images such as "autumn evening" capture a scene at the very moment of its dissolution.

Something even more subtle seems involved in Chômei's statement. The experience he points to involves a vision of a complex spiritual vastness, in which reality is one boundless interpenetrating web, and the visible world is directly tied to the ineffable Absolute. For Chômei, such a vision is overpowering and inherently sorrowful. The sadness here comes not from value being lost as in *mujô*, but from the realization that value is infinite, beautiful beyond our comprehension, and reaches into an unknown. With such a vision, one is moved, gently, to tears.

The suggestiveness of expression involved in *yûgen*, *yojô*, and *yûen* is also related to Buddhism. This world is ultimate reality, which cannot be grasped by intellect or language. Concrete images can, however, give intimations of the emptiness palpable reality participates in. If form is emptiness, then language needs to be suggestive and meaning indeterminate. Thus the *Shinkokinshû* poets sought a subtlety and depth of poetic diction that revealed indeterminate emotional overtones and the suggestion of a noumenal dimension of the phenomenal world.

*Shinkokinshû* poetics are a powerful example of religion and aesthetics blended together. The vision of poets such as Shunzei and Teika was grounded in Buddhist notions reality, perception, and language, and they brought to those notions a rich sensitivity to the beauty of the world. One of the best statements about *yûgen* the suggests much of what is discussed above is by the Noh dramatist Zeami Motokiyo.

To watch the sunk sink behind a flower clad hill. To wander on in a huge forest without thought of return. To stand upon the shore and gaze after a boat that disappears behind distant islands. To contemplate the flight of wild geese seen and lost among the clouds. And, subtle shadows of bamboo on bamboo.