

ENCOUNTERING JAPANESE SPIRITUALITY

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EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO I TRAVELLED OUT TO JAPAN for the first time; since then, I have lived there for two years ministering as an Anglican priest. I have also visited the country on nine occasions, and I have kept contact with a wide circle of Japanese friends. This is perhaps a pattern of encounter not untypical in today's world: some time for deep engagement with another culture; subsequent episodes of renewed acquaintance; and plenty of space for reflection on these experiences within another cultural setting. But I have not had the long immersion of missionaries of an earlier generation, for whom Japanese ways of living and thinking would have become as much part of them as their own cultural inheritance. Nor can I write from the perspective of a Japanese Christian, for whom the missionary has come from an alien setting. I can only answer the question of how Japanese spirituality has enriched my Christianity out of a limited kind of experience.

One must be wary of any expression as general and undifferentiated as 'Japanese spirituality'. Japan, maybe more than many other countries, has suffered from the conceit that a unique 'essence of Japaneseness' can be identified in its cultural life. The implication is that all Japanese people somehow exhibit the same ways of thinking, perceiving and acting, and that those who do not fit this template can be dismissed as 'not really Japanese'. It may also be implied that these are realities inaccessible to non-Japanese.¹ Were any of this to be true, of course, it would mean not only that Japan was an extraordinarily uninteresting country, but also that any 'dialogue of experience' was doomed to failure.

¹ The view I am outlining here (and perhaps caricaturing) is known as the *Nihonjinron* thesis: that the Japanese race is in some way endowed with spiritual and cultural qualities uniquely different from those of other countries, particularly the West. While this view can still be found advanced occasionally in popular introductions to Japanese studies, its influence is diminishing among Japanese and non-Japanese authors alike. It can perhaps best be seen as a natural reaction to Japan's rather sudden, traumatic entry onto the world scene after centuries of seclusion.

In fact, though, the matter is very different. ‘Japanese spirituality’ is like an envelope holding a complex, extraordinary variety of messages, linked to a rich diversity of cultural patterns. In what follows, I identify two motifs in particular that have engaged me: the immediacy of the numinous as perceived in art; and literary expressions of how transience is universal. But I make no claim to describe the essence of ‘being Japanese’; I am simply naming important cultural strands which have challenged me in my engagement with Japan.

Natural Immediacy

Japanese culture from its earliest recorded days is marked by keen awareness of the beauty of nature. Aristocratic life in medieval Japan was regularly punctuated by ‘viewing outings’ such as the one described in an eleventh-century Court Calendar:

Ninth Day of the Ninth Month—The Emperor and his Court inspect the chrysanthemums in the Palace gardens. Afterwards there is a banquet. Poems are composed, and the guests drink wine in which chrysanthemums have been steeped.²

This aesthetic tradition has been democratized in contemporary Japanese society, and it persists to a remarkable degree. Crowds of people, in the bleakest suburban sprawls of greater Tokyo, still gather on spring evenings under isolated cherry trees for *hana-mi*, high-spirited parties to celebrate, during its short life, the pink blossom’s beauty.

This artistic awareness relates to what might be called ‘spirituality’ in a number of ways. Historically, the religious traditions of Japan have fostered a decided sense of the numinous in nature. The term *kami*, denoting the objects of worship in the indigenous cults of Shinto,³ was elaborated by the eighteenth-century scholar Motoori Norinaga as follows:

It is hardly necessary to say that it includes human beings. It also includes such objects as birds, beasts, trees, plants, seas, mountains

² Quoted in Ivan Morris, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 177.

³ *Kami* is generally translated into English as ‘god(s)’, and is indeed the word used in modern Japanese translations of the Bible for ‘God’. As Norinaga’s definition suggests, however, this translation could be misleading if interpreted in a personalist sense.



Cherry Blossom Time at Ueno (*detail*),
by *Moronobu Hishikawa* (1631-1694)

and so forth. In ancient usage, anything whatsoever which was outside the ordinary, which possessed superior power or which was awe-inspiring, was called *kami* . . . There are further instances in which rocks, stumps of trees and leaves of plants spoke audibly. They were all *kami*. There are again numerous places in which seas and mountains are called *kami*. This does not have reference to the spirit of the mountain or the sea, but *kami* is used here directly of the particular mountain or sea. This is because they were exceedingly awe-inspiring.¹

It is important here to notice Norinaga's insistence that *kami* is not an object of veneration *inhabiting* a particular natural feature, be it mountain or sea. Rather, it is in some way *identical* with the mountain or sea. To a Westerner, this might at first seem like unreflective idolatry. But the veneration here is not of the kind that Western monotheists address to God. Rather, the *kami*, in all their various forms, evoke an attitude closer to aesthetic appreciation. Shinto scholars thus claim a continuity between the *kami* and secular patterns of Japanese life such as the *hana-mi*, the parties celebrating the pink blossom.²

The cults of the *Kami* exhibit a linkage of 'sacred' and 'secular' which is expressed with greater sophistication in the traditions of Mahayana Buddhism. The doctrinal foundation for this linkage lies in the so-called claim that enlightenment can and should be attained suddenly, a 'subitist' position. This contrasts with a more 'gradualist' view, according to which the attainment of enlightenment takes many lifetimes. We find this 'subitism' in Kukai (744-835), the founder of the esoteric Buddhist tradition in Japan:³

Q: In *sutras* and *shastras* (scriptures and commentaries) it is explained that after three aeons one can attain enlightenment. Is there evidence for the assertion that one can attain enlightenment in this very existence?

⁴ Norinaga, *Kojikiden*, 3, translated in Daniel Holtom, *The National Faith of Japan* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1938), pp. 22-25.

⁵ This claim to continuity can also of course prove difficult for those Christians and others who do not feel able to acknowledge the *kami* in any way—it raises particularly sharp questions of religious freedom in relation to the use of 'State Shinto' to validate the imperialism and militarism of the Japanese regime in the years leading up to the Second World War.

⁶ Also (popularly) known by his posthumous name as Kobo Daishi.

A: The *Tathagata* [the Buddha] has explained it in the esoteric Buddhist texts.

Q: How is it explained?

A: It is said in the *Vajraśekhara Sutra* that 'The one who practises this *samadhi* [meditation] can immediately realise the enlightenment of the Buddha'.⁴

In the search for this instantaneous and present enlightenment, Kukai laid emphasis on the importance of silence, gesture, colour, and form. Subsequent Japanese Buddhism broadened this vision. It developed the idea of a universal 'Buddha nature', or capacity for enlightenment, present in all things. Every being, it was claimed, was 'originally enlightened' to the Buddhist reality, and included within itself the potential to realize this in actuality.⁵ Just as Norinaga had insisted that *kami* was the very essence of things, so the Zen master Dogen (1200-1253) maintained that this Buddha-nature was not a distinct entity somehow inherent or located in things, but was rather to be identified with them:

There are those who assert that the Buddha-nature is like the seeds of plants and trees, which, when moistened sufficiently by the rain of the Law (the Buddhist teaching), send forth sprouts to become stalks and trunks, branches, leaves, flowers and seed-containing fruits. This is the thinking of ordinary people. Even though they think this way, they should realise that each and every seed and piece of fruit is the Buddha-nature itself.⁶

Though Dogen's thought is complex and sometimes obscure, the influence of Zen Buddhism on Japanese culture remains immense in particular through its emphasis on a direct intuition of the reality of things. This intuition is triggered through minimalist artistic

⁷ Kukai, 'Attaining Enlightenment in This Very Existence', in *Kukai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), edited by Yoshito S. Hakeda, p. 225. The characters translated 'in this very existence' (*sokushin*) literally mean 'in this very body'.

⁸ See Jacqueline Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999).

⁹ Dogen, 'Bussho' (Buddha-nature), in *Shobo-genzo*, edited by Yuho Yokoi (Tokyo: Sankibo Buddhist Bookstore, 1985), p. 24.

techniques, unlocking a pre-verbal sense of recognition in the perceiver.⁷

Shinto and Buddhism, therefore, have both shaped a sensitivity in Japanese spirituality to the numinous in the natural world. There is a sense that the numinous is an immediate and inseparable presence in materiality, is apprehended through aesthetic experience. There is thus a reluctance to draw sharp boundaries between the 'secular' and the 'spiritual'. It took me time to become aware of the religious roots of this spirituality. But I encountered its reality in contemporary Japanese culture soon enough when I was invited to take part in a bibulous *hana-mi* party in Yokohama.

From that first encounter onwards, I have found that Japanese culture insistently leads to what might be called a 'veiled dialogue'. There is certainly a dialogue; if we are engaged with this instinctive aesthetic awareness of the numinous in the natural world, we touch into foundational convictions of Japanese spiritual culture. At the same time, the dialogue is veiled, since the religious roots and resonances of those insights are in large measure hidden in the modern, post-industrial society that is contemporary Japan. Here, perhaps, there is particular scope for a 'dialogue of religious experience'. We in contemporary Britain live our faith in a society that is largely post-religious, but in which culture is moulded by Christian spirituality to an extent we often do not realize. Shinto and Buddhism occupy an analogous position in modern Japanese culture.

What can I make of this as a contemporary Western Christian? One cannot answer such a question objectively: if the dialogue of experience is to mean anything in my life, the 'I' who is reflecting on the engagement must be an 'I' who in the engagement is already changing. The most obvious way of describing the change is in terms of an enlargement or clarifying of vision regarding sacramentality and immediacy.

My spirituality has been nurtured in Western Catholicism, mediated by Anglicanism. In this tradition, God's saving presence in the life of the believer is found above all in the sacraments. What do I mean by 'sacrament'? The Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer* tells us, in best Augustinian fashion, that a sacrament is '... an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace given unto us, ordained by Christ himself, as a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge

¹⁰ Thomas Hoover, *Zen Culture* (New York: Random House, 1977), pp. 223 ff.

to assure us thereof.' The perceptible objects used—bread and wine, water, oil, and so on—are indeed charged with spiritual power. At the same time, they conceal as much as they reveal: the divinity conveyed within them uses them merely as a means to signify and convey grace. Even authors who write in terms of transubstantiation present the accidents—that which can be seen, touched, tasted—as a sensible barrier: in Thomas Aquinas' classic hymn *Adoro te devote*, Christ is 'shrouded (*velatus*)' in the sacrament. Perhaps this way of thinking is unavoidable, but it also involves a danger, particularly when the traditional language is used within a secularized world. We can all too easily narrow down the meaning of 'sacramentality' solely to one mode of divine presence, the mode of a transient guest from beyond in only some privileged parts of the natural world.

My experience of Japanese spirituality has left me unsatisfied with that approach. What makes the sacraments special is that they in some way compact a numinosity that pervades the *entire* natural world. This everyday presence of the divine usually evades our notice, just because it is so all-pervasive and so close to us. Its recognition depends on something like an aesthetic experience, unlocking our powers of perception to see that there is no truly 'secular' space in our lives, no space where the divine does not find us. This insight is well rooted in Christianity. But for me it was Japanese spirituality which opened up this wider sense of sacramentality, even if I already in one sense knew of it from my own Anglican tradition:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see;
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee.

A man that looks on glass
on it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
and then the heavens espy.⁸

Another way of putting this is to say that Japanese spirituality has greatly sharpened my sense of how God is immediately present in the

¹¹ George Herbert, 'The Elixir', from *The Temple*. The idea recurs in many other hymns commonly sung by Anglicans, such as Charles Wesley's 'Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go', or John Keble's 'New every morning is the love'.

world. Of course this is in one way simply to repeat the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. It is only the sustaining presence of God in every fibre of creation that holds it in being, and preserves it from slipping back into the void. But—to borrow an idea from the retiring Archbishop of Canterbury—our age has been robbed of any feeling for this presence.⁹ For many people, the very word ‘God’ has been so badly abused, or become so abstract, or simply grown so tired, that it no longer conveys anything of interest. If people think of the divine at all, they speak of remoteness or abstraction.

I myself, strangely, feel different; at least on a good day, ‘God’ is for me an exciting and a proximate reality. When I ask myself why, I find myself sensing that Japanese ways of looking at the world have helped open my eyes to God’s pulsating presence throughout creation. Many Japanese people would talk of this in quite different terms, of course. If they were philosophically minded, they might talk about a universally present ‘Buddha-nature’; if they were religiously inclined, they might use the language of *kami*; many again would be content simply to sit and enjoy nature, celebrating it by *hana-mi* or whatever. But however they expressed it, they would be bearing witness to the startling divine proximity to all people in all places. Luke presents Paul as appealing to the same principle when he attempts to present Christianity to the Athenians:

From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘in him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘for we too are his offspring’.¹⁰

Ceaseless Transience

A spirituality of immediacy is also a spirituality of transience. That which is recognised here and now is for one time only; it is characterized by the impermanence that Buddhist teaching sees as the condition of all existents. Cherry trees are so popular at the time of

¹² George Carey, *The Great God Robbery* (London: Fount, 1989).

¹³ Acts 17:26-28—this brief text may be quoting no less than three pagan authorities.

hana-mi precisely because within a few days their beauty vanishes: the blossoms drop to the ground, poignantly reminding us that all things are constantly coming into being and passing away. A note of wistful sadness runs through much Japanese literature as it reflects on this theme:

This perfectly still
Spring day bathed in the soft light
From the spread-out sky,
Why do the cherry blossoms
So restlessly scatter down?¹¹

The prose and verse of Japan's greatest writer, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), develop the theme of transience with particular power, particularly the 'travel diaries' of his later years, when—deeply influenced by Zen Buddhism—he spent his days in successive journeys around Japan. As he travelled, he sought through his writings to evoke a sense of what he called *sabi*. Literally, this word means 'loneliness'; in Basho however, this is a complex term with three levels of meaning:

On a physical or visual level, *sabi* meant the sense of depth that results when something implicitly brilliant is covered by subdued, muted colours or material. On a more psychological level, *sabi* implied a quiet beauty or depth in loneliness. *Sabi* also represented a general principle of emotional connotation in imagery, of human emotion submerged in landscape.¹²

This subdued yet complex state of detached awareness draws on two realities of experience: the poet's perceptions of constant change in each scene that he sees around him, and his own repeated moving away from one place as he journeys on to another. These realities jolt him out of a settled and myopic sense of security that imagines the world as permanent and unchanging, and set him apart from conventional existence. At the same time, however, Basho remains in

¹⁴ Poem (*waka*) by Ki no Tomori, from the collection *Kokinshu*, completed in 905—translation taken from *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, edited by Donald Keene (London: Penguin, 1968), p.75.

¹⁵ Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Basho* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 310, n. 36.

human contact, manifest in his careful and sympathetic observation of his fellow men and women, and in a warm delight in their company.

In his own day, he seems to have occupied an ambiguous position between the secular and the religious life:

My head is clean shaven, and I have a string of beads in my hand. I am indeed dressed like a priest, but priest I am not, for the dust of the world still clings to me.¹³

The liminal position which Basho occupied socially seems to characterize his attitudes more widely, as can be seen in two respects. Firstly, the travel writings, despite the note of sadness penetrating them, also convey a real sense of forward momentum: the poet sets out with alacrity on the open road. This point is at its clearest at the start of his masterpiece *Oku no hosomichi* ('Narrow Road to the Deep North'):

No sooner had the spring mist begun to rise over the field than I wanted to be on the road again to cross the barrier-gate of Shirakawa in due time. The gods seemed to have possessed my soul and turned it inside out, and roadside images seemed to invite me from every corner, so that it was impossible for me to stay idle at home.¹⁴

Despite the hardships he will face, Basho is determined not only to accept this invitation here and now, but also to pursue the course which lies ahead. He can truly say that his 'very home is the open road'.¹⁵

Secondly, the detached 'loneliness' of *sabi* should not be misinterpreted: it in no way connotes an avoidance of other men and women, or an aversion to them. On the contrary, it is precisely out of the heart of *sabi* that the poet can appreciate the full depth of human fellowship. One immediate expression of this can be seen in how he relates to his travel-companions, and to those whom he meets on the way. *Oku no hosomichi* ends with a *haiku*, poignantly acknowledging how painful it

¹⁶ This is the ironic description Basho gives of himself in *Nozarashi Kiko* ('Records of a Weather-Exposed Skeleton'); see Matsuo Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches*, translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 54.

¹⁷ Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 97.

¹⁸ The translation of the evocative phrase *tabi o sumika to su* given by Dorothy Britton, *A Haiku Journey: Basho's Narrow Road to a Far Province*, p. 29 (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1974). Yuasa's 'spend every minute of life travelling' seems to me rather to miss these resonances.



Basho Leaving, by Hayakawa Ikutada

is to part from friends even as it acknowledges the need to travel onwards:

As firmly-cemented clam-shells
Fall apart in autumn,
So I must take to the road again,
Farewell, my friends.¹⁶

At the same time, Basho was also very conscious of an invisible fellowship with earlier poets who had travelled the roads of Japan before him.¹⁷ His journeys represented a conscious 'dialogue with the ancients', who had seen the same scenes he was seeing, and whose poetic responses to those scenes moulded his own verse. Basho sees himself not as a solitary walker, but as one who is supported by a great community of seekers, and who is in some sense continuing that community.

I have dwelt on Basho's experience at some length for two reasons. Firstly, he continues to be widely influential in modern post-Buddhist

¹⁹ Basho, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, p. 142.

²⁰ In particular, *Oku no hosomichi* at several points pays tribute to the poet-monk Saigyō (1118-1190). Shirane points out that the whole work can plausibly be interpreted as an 'offering to Saigyō's spirit' on the five-hundredth anniversary of his death (*Traces of Dreams*, p. 310, n. 36).

Japan, even though his work is deeply religious. He expresses an important dimension of Japanese spirituality: detachment from security; recognition of transience; commitment to a life of permanent journeying. On several occasions, Japanese friends have expressed their thoughts to me in the language of Basho's writings, or with reference to his life. Japan's secularized culture has religious roots; and even in a post-religious society, there can be a dialogue of religious experience.

Secondly, the figure of Basho in particular—his acceptance of permanent transience—sheds light on the powerful yet enigmatic Christian symbol of 'the Way'.¹⁸ This symbol can be troublesome for those engaged in inter-faith dialogue. The Jesus of the Fourth Gospel declares: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me'.¹⁹ Christians have often been unimaginative in how they understand this teaching: we need to get from one point to another, and Jesus is the only route by which that journey is possible. Consequently, all 'other faiths', all teachings which propose some other route map to get from here to there, are at best inadequate, and at worst dangerously misleading. There are several questionable points in this reasoning, not least the assumption that different faiths differ primarily in offering different routes to the same destination.²⁰

But perhaps it is possible to understand this teaching differently. Perhaps Jesus is the Way in a world of transience. It is not by chance that John locates this teaching at the disciples' last night with their Lord, a time when their certainties were rapidly dissolving.²¹ The Passover season, too, must have reinforced the sense of making a transition from a known situation to the unknown. In such an unsettling situation, what does Jesus offer his disciples? When Jesus presents himself as 'the Way' on which they must walk, I hear an echo

²¹ The most developed treatment of this theme of which I am aware is by the Japanese Jesuit, Kakichi Kadowaki, *Michi no Keijijogaku* ('Metaphysics of the Way' (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990). Kadowaki presents both Dogen and Basho, as 'guides to the Way who is Jesus Christ'.

²² John 14:6.

²³ See, for example, Mark Heim, who, in a very lucidly argued book, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), calls for a re-examination of the 'axiom' that the various religions are all claiming to offer broadly the same kind of fulfilment by different routes, a point on which 'pluralists' and 'exclusivists' generally agree. He suggests that this assumption be replaced by open recognition of a 'diversity of religious ends'.

²⁴ See Kenneth Cracknell, *Towards a New Relationship: Christians and People of Other Faiths* (London: Epworth, 1986), pp. 78 ff.

of how Basho responded to transience. Basho embraced his transience by embarking on a life of travel; Jesus has nothing but this Way to give. When Philip crassly asks for a glimpse of the destination ('Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied'), he is rebuked because he fails to recognise the challenge of journeying present before his eyes ('You still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father').²² Later in these chapters, Jesus indeed offers reassurance and promises the gift of the Spirit. But this reassurance in no way reduces the challenge of the Way set before the disciples. Rather, the Spirit is the one who 'leads' on a continuing journey; ahead lie hardships, the pain of separation, the threat of death.²³

The Japanese poets wrote of a journey through the fleeting world, undertaken nevertheless in confidence, awareness and appreciation. They do not help us answer the exegetical and doctrinal questions raised by John's enigmatic text, but they do perhaps set those questions in a new light. Perhaps Basho, and those whom he has inspired, have sensed in their own lives the compelling invitation of the Way whom Christians believe to have appeared in human history as Jesus of Nazareth? Perhaps his poetic awareness of transience in some way offers a witness from which Christian spirituality can learn? Perhaps evangelization involves nothing other than greeting others whom we meet on the way, inviting them to share our journey, or simply accepting their hospitality. Perhaps we experience the Church through the ages as a community of pilgrims who have trodden this way before us, and have left their traces for us to follow? There is, of course, nothing particularly new in these ideas. But it is the poetic spirituality of Japan which has brought them to life for me.

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²⁵ John 14: 8-9.

²⁶ John 14: 25-29; 15: 18-19; 15: 26-16: 22.