

Touching the Intangible: Zen and the Arts of Japan

Zen is the uniquely Japanese branch of Buddhism that, originating in India and distilled by five hundred years of Chinese Taoist thought, has flourished in Japan for nearly a thousand years. It is also a word which today is associated with all manner of Japanese-inspired design from miniature bonsai and rock gardens to sushi-chic ceramics. What exactly is Zen and how did it come to influence not only the world of high art but popular culture and everyday life in the West as well? A look at its development and influence on the culture of Japan will help us understand how this esoteric doctrine has come to be a symbol of the simplicity, inner reflection and spiritual transcendence increasingly in demand in our fast-changing and complex world.

Defying definition as a doctrine or a religion, Zen can be described as an inner or spiritual journey towards enlightenment, known as *satori*, an awakening that is achieved through the realization that one is already an enlightened being, that one already possesses a Buddha nature. Whether acquired in a sudden flash of insight or through a gradual process, as emphasized by the Soto and Rinzai schools respectively, *satori* is preceded by the attainment of a pure state of nothingness. Indeed, when asked to explain the first principle of the new “doctrine” to a Chinese emperor ca. 520 A. D., its earliest patriarch and founder, the Indian monk, Bodhidharma, (known in Japan as Daruma) is reputed to have replied, “Vast emptiness, nothing holy” (Sweet, “Collecting”).

What makes Zen so confounding to those who attempt not to follow it but to understand it intellectually is just this central concept of nothingness, or *mu*. Unlike the other major religions of the world, Zen rejects transmission of its truths through any sacred scripture or text. Indeed, it maintains a deep distrust of language itself for, as P. T. Kasulis explains in *Zen Action Zen Person*, “words cannot be referents to non-linguistic bits of reality” (23). Daisetsu Suzuki sheds further light on this rejection of language when he writes in *Zen and Japanese Culture*, “Zen is not necessarily against words, but it is well aware of the fact that they are always liable to detach themselves from realities and turn into conceptions. And this conceptualization is what Zen is against” (5). It is only through an intuitive grasp of the nothingness underlying all our conceptualizations of reality, the nothingness that is absolute being, that one can reach a deeper truth about existence. For a Zen Buddhist, this entails a complete expunging of the self and a return to “the nondiscriminating source of experience or reality” (Kasulis 12). What this means, in fact, is that to experience *satori*, one must become *mu*.

Mu, like Zen itself, owes a deep debt to both its Indian and Chinese predecessors. The “vast emptiness” Bodhidharma was hinting at was a distillation of such concepts as *śūnyatā*, or emptiness, from the second-century Indian pre-Zen Patriarch, Nāgārjuna (Kasulis 16), and the Taoist idea of Nonbeing (Kasulis 37). *Mu* is not to be thought of as a simple negation however, but rather as a “universal solvent” through which one’s personal identity and attachments to predetermined conceptualizations of reality are stripped away. The difficulty with *mu*, however, is that one cannot stand outside it in order to understand it. Again, one must become *mu*. And this becoming *mu* is, in essence, what Zen is.

If *mu* is not a negation, neither is it an unconscious state. Rather, *mu* is a state in which, having unshackled oneself from one’s attachments, one abides in an “active, responsive awareness of the contents of experience as directly experienced” (Kasulis 47).

Because this is not a state easily achieved or naturally occurring, Zen masters try to create a context of *mu* (52), a state of emptiness that is immediate, nonverbal and intuitive. Among the best-known tactics used include the seated meditation practice known as *Zazen* which was developed by the thirteenth-century Zen master and founder of the Sōtō School, Dōgen, and the striking, shouting and mystifying utterances known as *koan*, associated with the Rinzai School founded by Ekaku Hakuin in the eighteenth century. One's authentic experience of reality must be preceded by the realization of the pure non-reflective state of consciousness of *mu*, induced by the practice of one or more of these techniques. Once *mu* is achieved there occurs what Dōgen and Hakuin called, respectively, the "molting of body and mind" and the "Great Death." It is only with the shedding of the ego that this implies and the casting off of all old associations and conceptualizations that one can connect with the flow of pure experience that is *satori*.

For Dōgen, this idea of flow meant nothing less than the experience of the Taoist universal flux, the inexorable flow of temporal events. The awakening involves connecting to the ceaseless unfolding of experience and knowing, intuitively, what Dōgen termed its *genjokōan* or "presence of things as they are," its suchness. Enlightenment is not a single event but a continually renewing revelation of reality, a "recurrent return to what is ... being directly experienced" (Kasulis 91, 92). As such, one might imagine the *satori* experience to be one of the metaphysical heights achievable by humans, but what is remarkable about Zen is that it is neither transcendent nor extraordinary (Kasulis 84.) In fact, according to Joshu [Ch: Chao Chou], to live Zen is not to lead a Zen-like life but to live an ordinary life (Kasulis 42). It is this aspect of Zen, along with its unwavering focus on the essence of things, which has led to its overarching influence on the culture and arts of Japan.

The arts in Japan, unlike those in the West which tend to be associated with the elite, are intimately connected to the life of ordinary people. Flower arranging, the tea ceremony, swordsmanship and martial arts, the making and appreciation of ceramic ware, *haiku* and calligraphy are all pastimes practiced at every level of society. Moreover, all of the traditional arts of Japan have roots in the Zen tradition of reaching enlightenment through everyday experience, in, as Suzuki explains, finding meaning hitherto hidden in our daily, concrete, particular experiences. Meaning is revealed "in being itself, in becoming itself, in living itself." It is as Suzuki explains, "a life of *kono-mama* or *sono-mama*, 'the isness of a thing'" (16). In operating within a context of *mu*, in connecting to the formless, which is at once empty but the fountainhead of all possibilities, the Zen monks and the artists who came afterward learned to unleash, in a spontaneous act of creativity, form from nothingness. This act of creativity is one which, nonetheless, has been prepared for through the discipline of many years.

Being a response to the concrete world of the mundane, the traditional arts of Japan embody distinctly Japanese sensibilities, such as *mono no aware*, a deep sensitivity to things, especially those considered undeserving of even cursory notice in the west. For a Westerner, *mono no aware* is akin to what Wordsworth was getting at when he wrote, "To me the meanest flower that blows can give / thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." The ordinary, the everyday, this is the subject matter of traditional art in Japan. Whether a three-line poem about a frog or an unevenly shaped, primitive looking tea cup, Japanese art conveys other Asian concepts such as *wu-wei*, the Zen unintentionality or Taoist effortlessness that arises not so much from the perfecting of technique (though this

is a necessary precursor to the creative act), as the achievement of what Eugen Herrigel in *Zen in the Art of Archery* calls “the right presence of mind” (37). *Wu wei* is about becoming purposeless, egoless. *Wu wei* is to reside in *mu*, to be an empty vessel filled by the act of creation itself, to make oneself a vehicle for the realization of the work which, “hovering before [the artist] in ideal lines, realizes itself as if of its own accord (43).

Any discussion of Japanese art would be incomplete without mention of two other distinctly Japanese characteristics, *wabi* and *sabi*, which are closely tied to the Japanese appreciation of nature and highly evolved sense of nostalgia and which embody beauty in a form of imperfection or even ugliness (Suzuki 24). *Wabi* is what Suzuki calls the “Zen sense of the alone...transcendental aloofness in the midst of multiplicities” (23). It is a rejection of artifice and extravagance, a preference for the natural over the civilized, a kind of worship of poverty, “an innate longing for primitive simplicity” (23). Nearly inextricable from *wabi* is *sabi*, the root of the adjective *sabishii* or sad, which conveys a sense of melancholy and longing for the past. Like *wabi*, *sabi* embodies a sense of loneliness or solitude, and finds in the rustic and the unpretentious a beauty surpassing anything polished or perfect. Both *wabi* and *sabi* are rich in historical associations, as is another adjective applied to the traditional arts, *shibui*, a term which literally means “astringent” and conveys a sense of the restrained and disciplined, of refinement through austerity. In *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, legendary potter and founder of the Japanese folk crafts movement, Sōetsu Yanagi, shows the relation of *wabi sabi* and *shibui* to Zen thinking and highlights the “flavour of modesty, restraint, and inwardness” they convey. For Yanagi, the *shibui* quality is “the very skin of *mu*, its outward form” (124)

This “outward form” of *mu* that Yanagi is referring to can clearly be found in the art of the ink painting, or *sumie*, the origins of which can be traced back to a practice begun in Chinese Buddhist monasteries thirteen hundred years ago (Deguise) and later carried to Japan. Two very different works can help us to identify the Zen element in *sumie* art, the first a *haiga*, or form of poem-painting, by the eighteenth-century *haiku* master Miura Chora, and a more recent scroll *sumie* by the Zen Buddhist monk Nantembo, who straddled the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is interesting to note, at the onset, that a characteristic of *sumie* is just this association, not with professional artists, but with monks and poets who turn to it as an expression of an inner search or insight and not as a work of art in itself.

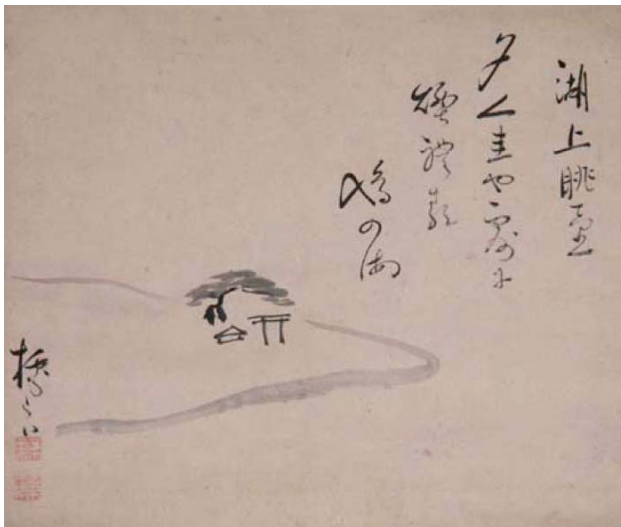


Figure 1 Miura Chora, a poem-picture known as *haiga*

In “A Brief History of Haiga,” Stephen Addis tells us that the form of the *haiga* is closely tied to *haiku* poetry and like *haiku* became a major form of artistic expression with Matsuo Basho (1644-1694) and later *haiku* poets, notably Buson whose illustrations grace Basho’s *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. Miura’s work is a delightful illustration of the developments in Japanese art from, on the one hand, the debt it shows to the Sung school of Chinese landscapes, and, on the other, the tendency towards extreme simplification that characterizes the development of Japanese art in general. In what could be a minor detail in a Sung monochrome landscape, here we see an extraordinarily simple scene of a Japanese shrine or temple, identifiable by the *torii* gate to its left, and an overarching tree, perhaps a willow, all situated on the barest suggestion of land. Illustrating the Zen predilection for essence over realistic detail, the concrete reality of both nature and structures is evoked by a bare minimum of strokes; indeed, the temple with *torii* gate could be a basic kanji character so minimal is its representation and so direct its execution. As Fredric Lieberman points out in “Zen Buddhism and Its Relationship to Elements of Eastern and Western Arts,” Zen does not create the illusion of reality but rather thinks beyond reality to get at its essence. Thus, as in this picture, lifelike perspective is abandoned and the objects coexist in a field that is characterized by artificial spatial relationships.

Two important characteristics of Japanese art, *wabi* and *sabi*, are clearly evident in this scene. The emptiness or, in Suzuki’s words, “transcendental aloofness” (23) that defines *wabi* is a crucial element here and, echoing Suzuki’s description of another painting of a boat at sea, there is the sense of the “incomprehensibility of the Absolute” encompassing the small shrine which floats on its bit of inconsequential land in empty space (22). Indeed, the suggestion of land is just that, mere suggestion, an evocation of form out of nothing. There is a sense of the mutability of existence and of the tenuous nature of the human presence in the eternal and vast infinity of the cosmos. The melancholy element of *wabi* goes hand in hand with *sabi* which we see in this work in the depiction of a remote and archaic Shinto shrine, an image rich in historical and emotional associations and displaying the “rustic unpretentiousness” and “archaic imperfection” by which Suzuki defines *sabi*. The overall feeling conveyed is one of a melancholy but peaceful solitude, of purity and simplicity, and of a remoteness in time and space that encourages reflection upon the eternal nature of familiar objects. This sense of *wabi* and *sabi* is amplified by the calligraphy which accompanies the scene which is entitled “Outlook on the Lake” and takes as its subject the most famous lake in all of Japan, Lake Biwa. The lines read: Ah dusk / a smoldering mist / over Biwa Lake.

Equally compelling in its simplicity but moving now to a primary theme in Zen monochrome painting, the second piece here by the great twentieth-century Zen master, Nantembo, illustrates the origin and purpose of much of Zen influenced art. In resonance with Zen Buddhist monks before him and since, Nantembo practiced ink monochrome painting and calligraphy as a means to express his religious and personal convictions and as a way to impart his own spirit into the work. As collector Belinda Sweet explains, it is the “sensed spirit of the Zen master himself that is Zen art’s real essence and reason for existence.” Indeed, “For Zen masters, the act of painting is a moving meditation.” In *Daruma From Behind* the eponymous first patriarch of Zen Buddhism is portrayed in a way that is indicative of the essential emptiness at the heart of Zen; its subject matter also makes this work one in a long tradition on the classic theme of Zen masters.

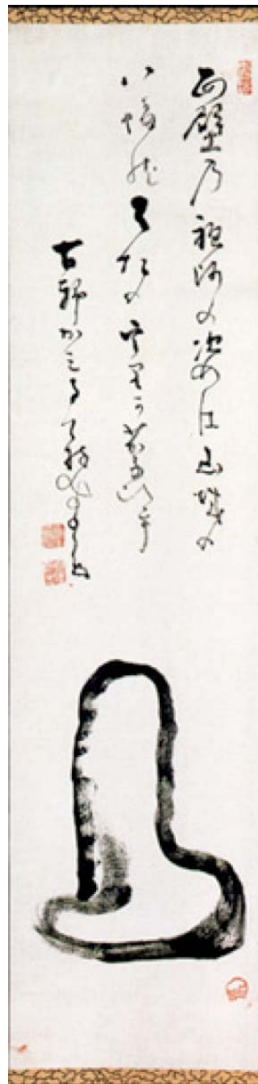


Figure 2 Nantembo, “Daruma From Behind,” Private Collection

Whereas Nantembo’s portrayal of Daruma in seated meditation certainly follows from tradition, this painting also exudes a freshness and humor more often found in the depiction of masters Kanzan and Jittoku who are customarily shown in high spirits (Sweet, “Collecting”). The highly unusual angle is a reference to the well known story of Daruma’s exile of thirty years during which he is said to have faced a wall and reflected on the question, ‘Who am I?’ It also speaks of the abandonment of the ego and the “facelessness” which Zen strives for. The accompanying calligraphy, Sweet tells us, illustrates the Zen monks’ use of humor to treat a serious philosophical concept: “The form of the grand patriarch facing the wall--or is it a melon or an eggplant from around Yahata in Yamashiro?” In this case the message does not seem to be the underlying unity

of all things as Sweet suggests (“Collecting”), but the emphasis on the abandonment of all conceptualizations and the letting go of the ego.

If we return to Suzuki’s list of *sumie* hallmarks, we see, in this work, all of them: directness, simplicity, movement, spirituality, completeness and creativity. More provocatively, Nantembo has given us, engagingly in the form of the patriarch, an *ensō*, the empty circle that is, according to Sweet in “Zen Circles of Illumination,” “the universal symbol of wholeness and completeness, and the cyclical nature of existence...” Like the *ensō*, this *Daruma* is the very embodiment of the primordial state that is *mu*. Again we are forced to contemplate and recognize the interdependency of form and void and to confront and ponder the nature of reality, the ground of all being, the Absolute.

Just as *sumie* paintings express a reality deeper than that which lies on the surface of things, so *haiku*, the brief seventeen-syllable form of poetry elevated and perfected by Bashō, offers us a glimpse of the eternal and unchanging *genjokōan* or “isness” of things beneath the surface conceptualizations and ideations by which we come to experience the world. The *haiku* poet accomplishes this through a deep contemplation of and kinship with the object of his poetry, most often scenes or elements found in nature, and a careful choice of wording with which to get at the essence of his subject. Bashō put it this way: “Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one...” (*Narrow Road* 33). As with the art of *sumie*, the poem emerges in a spontaneous and intuitive act of creation resulting from the poet’s emptying his or her mind and being open to that moment of heightened awareness in which the eternal nature of things breaks through to the consciousness. As Suzuki tells us, “haiku attempts to offer the most appropriate images in order to make us recall the original intuition as vividly as possible” (243). And it is this openness to the intuitive *satori* moment through a contemplation of nature so deep that the self disappears that ties *haiku* so closely to Zen. Indeed, the act of composing a *haiku* poem can be compared to a form of meditation in itself.

To the novice, *haiku* can appear overly simplified, a mere description of a pretty scene. But a closer reading reveals not only a keen appreciation of natural beauty but a juxtaposition of sensual or emotive elements which provides a *satori* spark of recognition in the reader, thus leading the reader to a deeper intuition of the world around him or her. All things, natural or mundane, are raised to a transcendently poetic level (Suzuki 230). A key element in this dynamic of contrasting elements is the *kigo*, or seasonal word, the use of which, as Patricia Donegan, in her critical study, *Chiyo-ni: Woman Haiku Master*, allows the reader to “enter the heart of the poem quickly, because it tells the season, the mood, and the cultural associations with only one word” (65). Moreover, the language of *haiku* follows centuries-old conventions which lend to each word used a layering of meaning and association so that, for example, the words “moon” or “water” signify much more than the objects themselves. Indeed, it is in the symbolism of the images used in *haiku* that the influence of Zen is particularly salient as can be seen in the following poems by Bashō and Chiyo-ni respectively.

Bashō’s indebtedness to Zen is well known and in his third travel sketch, *The Records of a Travel-worn Satchel*, can be found one of the poet’s most clearly religious *haiku*, here as translated by Daisetsu Suzuki, whose sparseness of language seems to most closely capture the directness and simplicity of the original:

The octopuses in the jars
 Transient dreams
 The summer moon

This poem describes a scene very familiar to an island people who have earned their living for centuries by fishing; we can imagine a moon shining down on a tranquil sea below which the octopuses, unaware that the jars are traps and not crevices in which to rest, dream their octopus dreams which are soon to end. Even for a Westerner it is not difficult to see the comparison to the human condition; eminent scholar and professor of Japanese art history, Harold G. Henderson tells us that “Whenever Bashō uses the word ‘dream,’ he seems also to be thinking of human life” (22), and we resonate with the idea, common to Zen and other branches of Buddhism, that the world we see is but an illusion, that life and the beauty it holds are momentary and fleeting. When we learn, however, that the moon, especially its reflection on water, is traditionally a symbol of Zen enlightenment (Donegan 48), and that the word “*hakanaki*,” here translated as “transient” but also suggesting “vain,” “futile,” or “useless” (Suzuki 234), this poem becomes a much more evocative meditation on the transitory nature of our existence. This is strengthened by the contrast, as exists in all masterful *haiku*, between that which is of the present moment and that which is eternal, here the octopus pots and the moon and water respectively.

The next *haiku* by eighteenth century poetess and Buddhist nun, Chiyo-ni, (1703-1775) is a perfect illustration of the relationship between *haiku* and Zen in the way a very ordinary object is elevated to a transcendental plane of pure poetry. It also illustrates the use of the *kireji*, or cutting word, which in English can only be approximated by a dash or an exclamation point but which in Japanese produces the “ah!” of a *satori* moment. Even more than the previous poem, at first glance Chiyo-ni’s observation seems very mundane, especially in the authentically simple and true-to-form translation by Donegan and her co-translator Yoshie Ishibashi:

morning glory –
 the well-bucket entangled
 I ask for water

The morning glory is a very pretty but common flower and in this scene its vine has become entangled with the rope of the well-bucket, this preventing the poet from drawing water, seemingly a simple depiction of an event with little meaning. In Chiyo-ni’s hands, though, the moment is both ordinary and sublime. In a moment of enlightenment, her mind emptied of all but the intuitive understanding of the morning glory, the poet is so struck by its beauty, indeed by its divine Buddha nature, that rather than break the vine she must beg for water elsewhere. When she exclaims, “Ah! Morning glory!” she is, as Suzuki suggests (246) in perfect identification with the flower. Indeed, she becomes the flower. The entire universe exists in this one blossom that resonates with the eternal and changeless nature of reality. This sense of the eternal and the momentary could not be captured in any form but *haiku*; as with the best of *haiku*, the moment captured here seems to echo through the centuries and continue in a timeless realm.

As we have seen with the arts of *sumie* and *haiku*, an inherent element of the beauty to be found in the art is the effortlessness at its moment of its creation, an

effortlessness that is manifested in a severe but evocative simplicity which allows not only the artist but the perceiver or user to become one with the essence of the subject treated. This insistence on the natural, direct, spontaneous and unstudied can also be seen in the use and appreciation of the Tea bowl, an integral part of the very Zen discipline of the Tea ceremony, or as it is known in Japan, the Way of Tea.

What distinguishes a genuine Tea bowl, Yanagi informs us, is not that it is made for the purpose of Tea but rather that it is, based on its natural and inherent beauty, adapted for the use of Tea. As Yanagi puts it, “The seeing eye and the using hand made tea utensils from ordinary objects” (180). Yanagi is referring here to the traditional and highly prized *meibutsu* Tea bowls, the finest of which are of Korean provenance, and not the more modern Japanese creations which are contrived and only imitate the simplicity and irregularity which are key features of the best pieces. The bowl shown here illustrates just how closely the Zen philosophy of emptiness and Zen virtues of poverty, humbleness of mind, and forswearing of worldly attachments are tied to the selection of the Tea bowl.



Figure 3 Kizaemon Ido teabowl. Korea. Yi dynasty (sixteenth century) Height: 8.8 cm

The uninitiated eye that would pass over this bowl as nothing but an old, dull, and imperfect piece of pottery, so hastily thrown that its rim is asymmetrical and its glaze uneven, would be unaware that these characteristics are precisely what make it so highly valued by those who “see.” Thrown by an illiterate Korean potter (hence the name Kizaemon) and used as a food bowl by common peasants, this poor man’s piece of “common crockery” was created with no conscious effort only to be selected later for use in the Way of Tea by Japanese Tea masters who recognized in it the criteria for beauty which they had formulated (Yanagi 148), a criteria very much informed by Zen. In form, color and design, this bowl exudes all of the qualities most highly prized by the Tea masters: the *wabi* and *sabi* rusticity, unpretentiousness and sense of the archaic that come with its simple origins and the *shibui* quality that is inherent in its irregular form, its monochrome color and minimal design. The bowl is subdued, simple, plain but also

possessing a quietness, depth and purity out of reach of the finest of porcelains, which, by nature of their highly finished completeness, can never fulfill the role of Tea bowl as their earthenware and stoneware cousins do. As Yanagi suggests, perhaps its deepest beauty lies in the infinite possibility that is inherent in its incompleteness. Its slight scars and spontaneous irregularities, the thickness of its rim, its very ordinariness suggest a utensil made not out of artifice but for a purpose, made to do work (Yanagi 192). This bowl is not a conceptualization of what a Tea bowl should be. It is the essence of a Tea bowl and was a Tea bowl before it was selected by the Tea masters. In this lies its eternal reality beyond the daily and momentary purpose for which it was first intended.

The most basic and mysterious aesthetic pleasure the Tea bowl affords is its connection to the very earth from which it sprang; in a similar way, the bamboo flute known as the *shakuhachi* speaks of the Japanese love of nature and evokes the mysterious and melancholy feeling of the wind in the pines of ancient forests. With music as with all the other arts, the aesthetics are governed by a Zen-like discipline and simplicity which seeks the essence or eternal quality of things and which achieves its end through the least possible means (Lieberman). Whether the sounds of nature or the sounds associated with the humble Zen life of monks, as is the case of two traditional pieces of *shakuhachi* music explored here, our attention is drawn not to a larger movement built up by individual notes, as in a Beethoven sonata, for example, but to the transitory nature of sound, sound as it exists in opposition to silence. In the traditional pieces “Hachigaeshi” (The Returning of the Ricebowl) and “Shin no Kyorei” (True Bell), both of which describe the humble activities of monks, there is little sense of movement or of a momentous event in the external world but rather a suggestion of atoms of sound vibrating in a void.

As with *sumie*, *haiku* and pottery, *Shakuhachi* music is informed by the Japanese values of *sabi*, *wabi* and, in particular, the constraint and austerity of *shibui*. In *Thinking About Music*, professor of music Lewis Rowell speaks of the “almost total absence of rhetoric” in Japanese music in general, an absence which is reflected in the economy and sparseness of the musical texture of these two pieces, and he could be speaking of “Hachigaeshi” and “Shin no Kyorei” when he states that Japanese music approaches the condition of silence rather than sound (198-199). Indeed, so sparse is the music that one must struggle to identify the metaphors suggested by the titles of these pieces. Whereas Beethoven’s sonata No. 8 in C Minor, “Pathétique,” for example, evokes the strong emotion that its title suggests, it is only a very attentive listening that reveals the feeling of receiving evoked by the change in pitch from lower to higher and back again to lower in “Hachigaeshi,” and the subtle trills that mimic the ringing of the monk’s bell in “Shin no Kyorei.” With this music we are encouraged to listen to the minute details of musical sound. Here is an aesthetic of stasis in which, as Lowell puts it, musical meaning is sought in the reverberation of the individual event and not, as with Beethoven and classical music in general, in the way musical events are connected (201). Far from the vibrant and emotional, the richly textured and dynamic sonatas of early Western Romanticism, we find in the solitary sound of the *shakuhachi* Zen-inspired qualities of *sabi*, *wabi* and *shibui*. Indeed, what we find is the sound of nothingness.

The Zen-like discipline of *shakuhachi* music or *honkyoku* as it is called, begins with the very manner of playing; the musician holds himself erect in a seated position which mimics Zen meditation and though capable of a great variety of timbre and pitch

gradation (Lieberman), the *shakuhachi* produces a solitary stream of sound so slow and static that to Western ears, it seems a form of meditation in itself. This is particularly evident in “Hachigaeshi” which starts lower but employs mostly notes in a high range. And though “Shin no Kyorei” displays a greater range and complexity of notes, compared to the rich texture and variety of timing in the three movements of Beethoven’s sonata, the melody seems secondary to the sound of the instrument itself. To appreciate this music is to achieve the purpose that Rowell suggests is the end of all Japanese art – that is to gain an aesthetic knowledge of the essence of things, illumination achieved by means of the immediate experience and intuition (194). This music, unpredictable and possessing no clear movement towards a climax, demands the same kind of being-in-the-moment that *Zazen* requires. The listener is not lifted to heights or plunged into depths, but always in the moment, always at the edge of the void.

For a newcomer to the Japanese arts, the lack of embellishment – indeed the nothingness - inherent in *shakuhachi* music, as in *sumie* and *haiku*, can be a daunting obstacle to an aesthetic appreciation of the unique beauty to be found in the “less-is-more” formula. These are arts so minimal and so refined that, contrary to ones’ first impression, they cannot be appreciated with one taste. Nor can they be dismissed. The “vast emptiness” at their heart makes us impatient at first but then it stops us in our tracks. The ineffable beauty that we cannot put our finger on but which speaks of an eternal reality beyond the busyness of our modern lives catches us in its yoke of serenity and demands that we pause, that we contemplate, that we meditate. Indeed, these arts demand that we see and hear again as if for the first time. They provide us with a *satori* spark of recognition of that which we had known all along.

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