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THE PATH OF THE POET-PRIEST, SAIGYO

Robert G. Sewell

Saigyō (1118-1190) was a Japanese nature poet, who in many respects set the tone of Japanese poetry for generations to follow. The Buddhist melancholy permeating his verse and his search for truth in nature were aspects of his poetry which were imitated by Japanese poets for centuries after he lay down his writing brush. That Saigyō was greatly esteemed by fellow poets is evidenced by the fact that the select editorial committee for the eighth imperial anthology, *Shinkokinshū* (1206), chose far more of his poems (ninety-four in all) than those of any other poet.

The life of Saigyō is of special interest in the cultural history of Japan. First, he lived during the twelfth century when a momentous change in Japanese society took place. Japan was transformed from a society dominated by a court aristocracy to a country ruled by military clans. While he remained aloof from these political struggles, Saigyō came in contact with many influential leaders in both the court and the military clans. The thirty-one syllable *tanka* or "short verse" form in which he wrote was not conducive to versification of public events. However, some of Saigyō's poems in this personal, lyric mode were actually inspired by specific battles and intrigues of the day, and all of his work is expressive of the general turmoil. Secondly, Saigyō was one of the first poets to break from the court-centered poetic world and seek inspiration directly from raw nature. His long treks into remote areas of Japan for both religious and poetic rejuvenation became exemplary for the Japanese literati of the medieval period (from the late twelfth century to the end of the sixteenth century). Even the haiku poet, Bashō (1643-1694), some five centuries later, consciously sought to travel Saigyō's original path. Finally, Saigyō's personal life, beset with the conflicting emotions of attachment to the worldly life versus his religious convictions as a Buddhist priest, is symbolic of twelfth century Japan's profound confrontation with Buddhism.

Saigyō was born in 1118 into the Sato military clan, and from an early age served as a guard at the imperial palace in Kyoto, where his duties were more ritualistic than combative. These early years were especially important since it was during this period that Saigyō made life-long contacts with the Kyoto poetic circles. He became a favorite of ex-emperor Toba (r.1108-1123) and emperor Sutoku (r.1123-1140). In 1140, at the age of twenty-two, Saigyō unexpectedly "left the world" and became a Buddhist priest, abandoning his wife and daughter. This drastic step at such an early age suggests great trauma in his life, and set scholars speculating on his motivations for centuries thereafter. While many

theories have been advanced, one of the most convincing is that Saigyo had an unhappy extra-marital affair with a woman of higher rank. While polygamy and promiscuity were a way of life in Japanese society at the time, romantic attachments between those of different rank were totally unacceptable. Soon after becoming a priest, Saigyo wrote a number of poems dealing with this affair.

During his priesthood, Saigyo lived at various Buddhist temples in Kyoto and made frequent trips to Ise province and the mountain regions of Yoshino and Kiso. In 1147 he undertook his first journey to Mutsu, a province in the northeast section of the Main Island, and a very remote area. This excursion began in early spring and was not concluded until the fall or winter of 1148. Soon after his return to Kyoto he moved to a temple on rustic Mt. Koya, some fifteen miles from the capital. Mt. Koya, the headquarters of Saigyo's Shingon sect, remained his home until he moved to Ise in 1180.

Saigyo also maintained relations with the court, participating in various rituals and poetic events. His relations with the imperial court began to cool, however, when his childhood friend, fellow poet, and close contact in aristocratic circles, emperor Sutoku, came upon hard times. Sutoku's difficulties began when he was forced to abdicate in 1140, the same year Saigyo became a priest. Sixteen years later, Sutoku mounted an unsuccessful uprising, the Hogen Insurrection of 1156, leading to his banishment. The former emperor died in his place of exile at Sanuki province on Shikoku Island in 1164. The fate of Sutoku and his lonely death greatly impressed Saigyo. He increasingly withdrew from secular affairs, his poetry becoming more strongly tinged with Buddhist melancholy and concerned with nature. Four years after the emperor's death, Saigyo made a pilgrimage to Shikoku and visited Sutoku's tomb.

During the Gempei wars (1180-1185), when the Taira and Minamoto military clans vied for supremacy, Saigyo wrote several poems about the heroes and battles of the war, but he was not directly involved in the conflict. In the same year as the outbreak of hostilities, Saigyo left Mt. Koya and moved to Yamadera Temple at Futami Bay in the province of Ise. In the final year of the war he delivered a series of talks on poetic composition to the priests of the Ise Imperial Shrine. These lectures were later compiled by one of his disciples into the *Saigyo shonin dansho* or *A Selection of Priest Saigyo's Lectures*.

At the age of sixty-eight in 1186, Saigyo began his second arduous journey to Mutsu in order to solicit contributions of gold for Todai-ji Temple in Nara. Some of his most famous and moving poems were written on this trip as he saw again the sights he had viewed forty years before. Upon his return from Mutsu Saigyo continued his priestly duties, writing poems and corresponding with his fellow poets until his death in 1190 at Kosen-ji Temple in the province of Kochi.

In the selection, arrangement, and translation of twenty-four of his poems. I have attempted to represent the evaluation of the poet-priest's personality. The poems are in rough though not exact chronological order and illustrate the emotional development of Saigyō, beginning with his unhappy love affair and his somewhat impetuous decision to become a priest, through his desire to escape into nature, and concluding with his full maturation. In constructing this sequence of poems I have been inspired by but not specifically bound to the methods of poetic integration employed by the original editors of the *Shinkokinshū*. Through techniques of association and progression these editors integrated the entire body of poems, selected from a variety of poets from different centuries, so the anthology can be read as a unified, aesthetic whole.

Tanka, the poetic form in which Saigyō wrote, was extremely restrictive and tradition-bound. Consisting of only thirty-one syllables divided into five syllabic units of five, seven, five, seven, seven, *tanka* was further limited by the use of only the vocabulary utilized in the first imperial anthology, *Kokinshū* (905), some two thousand words in all. In order to overcome these severe limitations, Japanese poets attempted to compress as much meaning as possible into their verse by developing a highly evocative and symbolic poetic diction. In the hands of the most successful poets this form may be as "difficult" and subtle as modern poetry. For one thing, the *tanka* poet had to rely extensively on ellipsis since one complete sentence could easily involve more than thirty-one syllables. While the fragmented quality of *tanka* verse was born of necessity, it was developed into one of the most appealing aspects of the form. Too much "filling-in" of the material omitted in the original tends to make translations of *tanka* prosaic and restricts the potential implications of the poems. Some additions in the translation process are, however, required to avoid complete incomprehensibility.

Another means by which the *tanka* poet amplified his medium was the use of implied metaphors and symbols. *Tanka* have been belittled as pictorial miniatures in verse because they frequently describe little scenes of nature. But it is characteristic of *tanka* expression for these portraits to have a whole range of conventional and unique symbolic possibilities, according to context. In his mature works Saigyō fully developed the "yugen" or "profound and subtle" style, in which a myriad of meanings are set forth from concrete images, describing both phenomena of nature and the interior landscape of the poet's mind.

There are three important recurring images in Saigyō's poetry which need explanation before the following poetic sequence can be fully enjoyed. The "tear-soaked sleeve" is a standard image in Japanese classical poetry, referring to the practice of raising the large sleeve of one's gown to cover the face while crying. Often the sleeve is described as becoming so wet with tears that, like a mirror, it can cause reflections on its surface. The

“mountains” and more specifically “Western mountains” in Saigyō’s poems denote Amida Buddha’s Western Paradise and are identified with the search for salvation. “Saigyō,” the poet’s priestly name, literally means “Going to the West” and signifies his religious quest.

By far the most significant image and symbol in Saigyō poetry is the moon. The moon has a variety of associations in classical Japanese poetry and its use exemplifies the elastic nature of traditional Japanese poetic diction. Moon-viewing, frequently described in Japanese literature, is a pleasant evening’s entertainment among friends. The moon also provides the soft light in which amorous adventures are conducted. It may as well provoke recollections of these enjoyable times when one finds oneself in nocturnal solitude. Paradoxically, the moon is also a traditional symbol of Buddhist enlightenment. When Saigyō portrays the moon setting in the Western mountains, this meaning is specifically evoked. This fluctuation in the significance of the moon in Saigyō’s poetry is an effective device which dramatizes personal conflict between secular desires and religious conviction. The moon, I believe, becomes the perfect symbol of Saigyō’s life.

The translations are based on the *Shinkokinshū* text in *Nihon koten bungaku taikei*, v.28 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1958).

UNREQUITED LOVE

Since I know what I am
I don’t want
To find fault with her
But my tear-soaked sleeve
Appears so resentful

Mi o shireba
Hito no toga to wa
Omowanu ni
Uramigao ni mo
Nururu sode kana (1231)*

Why must I resent her
Because she has grown distant?
There was a time when,
Unknown to myself, I did not
even know her

Utoku naru
Hito wo nani to te
Uramuran
Ori mo arishi ni (1297)

Just when
There are no clouds
I remember her
And the moon is blurred
By my tears

Kuma mo naki
Ori shimo hito o
Omoidete
Kokoro to tsuki o
Yatsushitsuru kana (1268)

*The numbers at the end of the romanized texts refer to the *Shinkokinshū* numbers.

In the narrow space
Between remote rocks
Alone, unafraid
Of others' eyes
I will weep over things

Harukanaru
Iwa no hazama ni
Hitori ite
Hito me omowade
Mono omowabaya (1099)

BECOMING A PRIEST AND ESCAPE INTO NATURE

Across Suzuka mountain
Shaking off
The floating world
What will become of me
As I go ringing my priest's bell?

Suzuka yama
Ukiyo o yoso ni
Furisutete
Ika ni nariyuku
Waga mi naruran (1611)

Beside the road
The willow's shade
Where clear water flows
Thinking "Just for a while"
I stayed on

Michi no be ni
Shimizu nagaruru
Yanagi kage
Shibashi to te koso.
Tachidomaritsure (262)

Not marking my return
With broken branches
I will go
Deeper into the mountains;
Is there a place
One hears no dismal things?

Shiori sede
Nao yama fukaku
Wakeiran
Uki koto kikanu
Tokoro ari ya to (1641)

Awakened by the sound of deer
Near my hut
In a small mountain field
Startled, I startled them

Oyamada no
Io chikaku naku
Shika no ne ni
Odorokasarete
Odorokasu kana (448)

SECULAR ATTACHMENTS AND RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS

I wait for the moon:
The clouds over the high peak
Have cleared;
The early winter drizzle
Must understand my feelings

Tsuki o matsu
Takane no kumo wa
Harenikeri
Kokoro arubeki
Hatsushigure kana (570)

I used to be light-hearted
When I looked at the moon
And now
I have met
Those old autumns
Again

Tsuki o mite
Kokoro ukareshi
Inishie no
Aki no mo sara ni
Meguriainuru (1530)

Through the night
The moon glistens
In my tear-soaked sleeve
As I remember
Autumns gone by

If I had not left the capital
Would my spirits
By dyed by
The chaste color of the moon?

If I quit my old life
There must be proof
I shun the passing world;
When I look, please hide
Behind the clouds,
Moon on an autumn night!

To think I found
The moon poignant
In the capital—
What a trifling pleasure
It now seems

The leaves
Have fallen in a village
At the foot of Ogura mountain
Through the bare treetops
I see the clear moon

Yo mo sugara
Tsuki koso sode ni
Yadorikere
Mukashi no aki o
Omoizureba (1531)

Tsuki no iro ni
Kokoro o kiyoku
Somemashiya
Miyako o idenu
Waga mi nariseba (1532)

Sutsu to naraba
Ukiyo o itou
Shirushi aran
Ware miba kumore
Aki no yo no tsuki (1533)

Miyako nite
Tsuki o aware to
Omoishi wa
Kazu ni mo aranu
Susabi narikeri (937)

Ogura yama
Fumoto no sato ni
Ko no ha chireba
Kozue ni karuru
Tsuki o miru kana (603)

THE MATURING LANDSCAPE

Spring at Naniwa
In the province of Tsu—
Was it a dream?
Winds cut across
The dry, tattered reeds

In a tree standing
Beside the barren field
The voice of a dove
Calling to friends—
Lonely, terrible evening

Even someone
Without emotion
Would be moved:
In a marsh a snipe darts up
On an evening in autumn

Tsu no kuni no
Naniwa no haru wa
Yume nare ya
Ashi no kareba ni
Kaze wataru nari (625)

Furuhata no
Soba no tachiki ni
Iru hato no
Tomo yobukoe no
Sugoki yugure (1674)

Kokoro naki
Mi ni mo aware wa
Shirarekeri
Shigi tatsu sawa no
Aki no yugure (362)

Living in such a place
 One understands solitude—
 In a mountain village
 Rain falling hard
 From an evening sky

Bending to the wind
 Mt. Fuji's smoke
 Is lost in the empty sky—
 My burning thoughts too
 Know no destination

Tare sumite
 Aware shiruran
 Yamazato no
 Ame furisusamu
 Yugure no sora (1640)

Kaze ni nabiku
 Fuji no kumori no
 Sora ni kiete
 Yukue mo shiranu
 Waga omoi kana (1613)

APPROACHING DEATH AND ENLIGHTENMENT

While I consider
 The aging image
 Of myself,
 In the distance
 The moon has waned

My soul is drawn
 To the mountains
 Where the moon goes;
 But in the darkened aftermath
 What becomes of my flesh?

Clear moon,
 Dispelling the darkness,
 Shining in my mind's sky:
 Has it reached
 The peak of Western mountain?

Fukenikeru
 Waga mi no kage o
 Omou ma ni
 Haruka ni tsuki no
 Katabukinikeri (1534)

Tsuki no yuku
 Yama ni kokoro o
 Okuriirete
 Yami naru ato no
 Mi o ikani sen (1779)

Yami harete
 Kokoro no sora ni
 Sumu tsuki wa
 Nishi no yamabe ya
 Chikaku naruran (1979)