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Citation to Publisher Version: Sewell, Robert G. (1977). The Path of the Poet-Priest Saigyō. Denver Quarterly 12(2), 120-126.


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THE PATH OF THE POET-PRIEST, SAIGYO

Robert G. Sewell

Saigyo (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 Saigyo was greatly esteemed by fellow poets is evidenced by the fact that the select editorial committee for the eighth imperial anthology, Shinkokinshu (1206), chose far more of his poems (ninety-four in all) than those of any other poet.

The life of Saigyo 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, Saigyo 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 Saigyo'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, Saigyo 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 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 Basho (1643-1694), some five centuries later, consciously sought to travel Saigyo's original path. Finally, Saigyo'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.

Saigyo 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 Saigyo made lifelong 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, Saigyo 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 Saigyo, 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 Shinkokinshu. 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 Saigyo 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, Kokinshu (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 Saigyo 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 Saigyo’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
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“mountains” and more specifically “Western mountains” in Saigyo’s poems denote Amida Buddha’s Western Paradise and are identified with the search for salvation. “Saigyo,” 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 Saigyo 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 Saigyo portrays the moon setting in the Western mountains, this meaning is specifically evoked. This fluctuation in the significance of the moon in Saigyo’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 Saigyo’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
Why must I resent her
Because she has grown distant?
There was a time when,
Unknown to myself, I did not
even know her
Just when
There are no clouds
I remember her
And the moon is blurred
By my tears

Mi o shireba
Hito no toga to wa
Omowanu ni
Uramigao ni mo
Nururu sode kana (1231)*
Utoku naru
Hito wo nani to te
Uramuran
Ori mo arishi ni (1297)
Kuma mo naki
Ori shimo hito o
Omooidete
Kokoro to tsuki o
Yatsushitsuru kana (1268)

*The numbers at the end of the romanized texts refer to the Shinkokinshu 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
Oidorokasarete
Oidorokasu 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
Meguriai muri (1530)
Through the night Yo mo sugara
The moon glistens Tsuki koso sode ni
In my tear-soaked sleeve Yadorikere
As I remember Mukashi no aki o
Autumns gone by Omoiizureba (1531)
If I had not left the capital Tsuki no iro ni
Would my spirits Kokoro o kiyoku
By dyed by Somemashiya
The chaste color of the moon? Miyako o idenu
As 1 remember Mukashi no aki o
If I had not left the capital Tsuki no iro ni
Would my spirits Kokoro o kiyoku
The chaste color of the moon? Miyako o idenu
If I quit my old life Sutsu to naraha
There must be proof Ukiyo o itou
I shun the passing world; Shirushi aran
When I look, please hide Ware miba kumore
Behind the clouds, Aki no yo no tsuki (1533)
Moon on an autumn night! Waga mi nariseba (1532)
To think I found Miyako nite
The moon poignant Tsuki o aware to
In the capital— Omoishi wa
What a trifling pleasure Kazu ni mo aranu
It now seems Susabi narikeri (937)
The leaves Ogura yama
Have fallen in a village Fumoto no sato ni
At the foot of Ogura mountain Ko no ha chireba
Through the bare treetops Kozue ni karuru
I see the clear moon Tsuki o miru kana (603)

THE MATURING LANDSCAPE
Spring at Naniwa Tsu no kuni no
In the province of Tsu— Tsu no kuni no
Was it a dream? Naniwa no haru wa
Winds cut across Yume nare ya
The dry, tattered reeds Ashi no kareba ni
In a tree standing Kaze wataru nari (625)
Beside the barren field Furuhata no
The voice of a dove Soba no tachiki ni
Calling to friends— Iru hato no
Lonely, terrible evening Tomo yobukoe no
Even someone Sugoki yugure (1674)
Without emotion Kokoro naki
Would be moved: Mi ni mo aware wa
In a marsh a snipe darts up Shirarekeri
On an evening in autumn Shigi tatsu sawa no
Koko 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 furisamusu
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 (1779)