THE "TRUE WORD" OF KŪKAI AND MODERN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

KOYA-SAN LECTURE BY MORGAN GIBSON, Ph. D.

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The Children of "Ah!"

having departed from their home-town
return to their home-town of "Ah!"

(Anonymous poem translated by Murakami Hiroshi)

I shall always be grateful to Professor Miyamoto and her colleagues and students for this opportunity to present to Koya-san the first English version of Kūkai's "Poems that Sing Ten Images" and to speak on Dharma in modern literature. In March of 1979, in Sainan-in here at Koya-san, Murakami Hiroshi Sensei and I celebrated the completion of our translations, but Tantric Poetry of Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi) Japan's Buddhist Saint was not published until the summer of 1982, by Mahachula Buddhist University in Bangkok, thanks to collaboration among Theravada, Mahayana, and Tantric traditions. Now, my wife Keiko, Professor Miyamoto's former student (who translated some information on mandala for the book), and I have returned to Koya-san, like "children of 'Ah!'"—regretting only that Murakami Sensei, teaching Yoga in Tokyo, could not be with us for this program.

First I would like to suggest some of the widespread Buddhist influences on modern literature in English, concentrating on the poetry of the late Kenneth Rexroth, who was deeply influenced by Kūkai and Shingon, and who loved Koya-san as his spiritual home. I will then discuss Kūkai's theory of mantra and its relevance for poetry, concluding with some of my "one breath poems."

Buddhism and Tantra have affected much Western literature, especially in America, for well over a century. The life of Shakyamuni was popularized for the Victorians in a long poem by Sir Edwin Arnold called The Light of Asia.
Indian classics were pondered by Emerson, Thoreau, and other Transcendentalists. Walt Whitman sang of himself as Brahman—the Universal Spirit resembling Dainichi Nyorai—chanted mantras, honored ‘the tender and junior Buddha,’” and expected to enter Nirvana (as I showed in an essay in The Rising Generation, 1976). Early in this century, Japanese Buddhism entered literature in English, thanks to Lafcadio Hearn and others. No plays translated by Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound deeply affected William Butler Yeats, the greatest poet in English since Shakespeare; and haiku and tanka influenced Imagist and other poets. T. S. Eliot studied Buddhist and other Indian classics at Harvard and alluded to “The Fire Sermon” in The Waste Land, the most famous modernist poem. Wallace Stevens revealed the no-mind of Zen in the subtle paradoxes and images of “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird”:

I
Among twenty snowy mountains,
The only moving thing
Was the eye of the blackbird.

II
I was of three minds,
Like a tree
In which there are three blackbirds.

III
The blackbird whirled in the autumn winds.
It was a small part of the pantomime.

IV
A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and a blackbird
Are one.

V
I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

In the beauty of Stevens’ innuendoes, we are reminded of silence in the midst of sound, many things interacting in one mind, the emptiness of all forms, and other
Buddhist themes. Like mantras, these poems embody compassionate wisdom. The sequence concludes:

XII
The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.

XIII
It was evening all afternoon.
It was snowing
And it was going to snow.
The blackbird sat
In the cedar-limbs.

Since World War II, friendship with Japan has encouraged Buddhism in America, aided by the work of Suzuki Daisetz Sensei and Zen masters in many study groups and meditation centers. Tantra has also spread in the United States, thanks to Shingon scholarship and Tibetan refuges such as Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, whose Naropa Institute in Colorado fosters ecumenical learning among Buddhists of all traditions and other contemplatives as well. There, literature programs led by poet Allen Ginsberg in memory of Zen novelist Jack Kerouac have produced much translation and original poetry. Other Buddhist influences on modern literature are examined by Earl Miner in *The Japanese Tradition in English and American Literature* and by Rick Fields in *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, a history of Buddhism in America. Indeed, many American poets currently practice Zen and Tantric meditation and are likely to be more familiar with Buddhist than with Christian culture. Gary Snyder, for instance, trained at Shokokuji in Kyoto, has written *The Fudo Trilogy* and other books of poetry and essays reflecting Japanese Dharma. It also permeates the work of Cid Corman, Edith Shiffert, Lindley Williams Hubbell, and other American poets who have lived for many years in Japan. The Trappist monk Thomas Merton united Christian and Buddhist thought in his many books. Among recent novels, Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* transmits Zen insight, and *The Serpent and the Rope*, by Raja Rao, Emeritus Professor of Buddhist Philosophy at the University of Texas, profoundly conveys Tantric wisdom.

KENNETH REXROTH (1905–82)

The American poet who best understood Japanese culture and Buddhist
thought was, in the opinion of Japanese scholars, Kenneth Rexroth. His absorption of Japanese Buddhism, originating in the 1920's, intensified between 1967 and 1980, when he made five tours of Japan, including a year of residency near Sennuji Shingon Temple in Kyoto, where he wrote his last poems. He had also translated much Japanese poetry and had written essays about Buddhism, his best being the Introduction to his edition of The Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn, in which he commented of Kūkai and Shingon as well as other Japanese sects.

After a trip around the world that brought him to Japan for the first time, The Heart's Garden, The Garden's Heart, his fifth and most fully realized long poem, was published in 1967 and reprinted the next year in The Collected Longer Poems. In this masterpiece of living in the Tao, the aging poet wanders through Japanese forests at the beginning of summer, “listening/Deep in his mind to music/Lost far off in space and time” (CLP, p. 283). He recalls Lao Tzu’s imagery of the Tao: “The valley’s soul is deathless./It is called the dark woman./The dark woman is the gate/To the root of heaven and earth” (p. 283). He feels towards the Tao like a man who has lost the woman he loves. But since illumination is like the innocence of fish who do not know that they live in water, the desire for it is self-defeating. The Tao is like light, but unseen, and like music, but unheard. Bathed in rich intermingling sensations, he is aware that the Tao “speaks in the molecules/Of your blood, in the pauses/Between your breathing.” Wandering over mountains and through valleys, conversing with tree frogs, bathed in delight, and in the city hearing the click of looms and the clink of pachinko machines, the poet receives “The reward of right contemplation” (p. 297): seeing things as they are, his mind freed from illusions born of grasping. To his enlightened eye, everything is holy, and nothing is specially holy in opposition to the profane: so the most ordinary object, such as a stone or uncarved block, is no less sacred than a temple. Similarly, any human act may be contemplative: the “Prostitute worships in her/Own way all through the white night” (p. 299).

Most of Rexroth’s New Poems (1974) also has Buddhist tones and themes. In one poem, the Buddha says that out of innumerable truths he has offered only a few, like a handful of autumn leaves (p. 36). In “Void Only,” all things dissolve in the emptiness of the “Song/Of the coiling mind/Only” (p. 22)—a terse union of two major schools of Mahayana philosophy joined in Shingon—the Madhyamika of Nagarjuna, in which All is Void (Shunyata), and the
Yogachara School of Asanga and Vasubandhu, in which All is Mind. In "Suchness" (the English equivalent of the Sanskrit Tathātā), "Our substance/Is whatever we feed our angel," and "like camphor, burning, leaves no ash" (p. 23). In "Late half moon," "Shaka merges with Tara" in Tantric union of wisdom and love (p. 24). And in "The Flower Sutra," a Japanese mountain cuckoo cries, "Kegonkyō" (the title of the sutra featuring The Net of Indra, in which each jewel reflects light from all the others, just as each being reflects all other beings).

Rexroth's last major book of poetry, The Morning Star (1979), contains three previously published collections written in Japan. Most of the poems in the first section, including all sixteen poems reprinted from The Silver Swan (1976) and twelve new poems, have a Buddhist perspective on the non-duality of life and death, mind and nature, past and present, and the one and the many. In two "Void Only" poems there are explicit allusions to Buddha Dharma: the full moon rising from the sea symbolizes the realization of Nirvana in Samsara (the experience of confusion, desire, pain, and ephemerality); and the poet, lost in love, awakes to discover that he is a "forest ascetic/In the impenetrable/Void only" (pp. 15 and 9).

The poems in the second section of The Morning Star were originally published as On Flower Wreath Hill (1976). According to Rexroth's notes, the title is taken from both a Kyoto cemetery and the Kegon-kyō (or Sanskrit Avatāṃsaka-sūtra) in which innumerable Buddhas reflect each other. "An aging pilgrim on a /Darkening path"—on the Middle Way—walks through autumn leaves near the grave of an ancient princess who seems to float near him, with the ghosts of heroes (pp. 35-36). He realizes the First Noble Truth of suffering in impermanence and insubstantiality so fully that he feels timeless, as memories re-echo like reverberations of a temple bell. The sight of the constellation Orion, his "guardian king" above the mountain named after the Sutra, purifies him (p. 41). Because "The combinations of the world are unstable/By nature," as the Buddha said just before he died, there is nothing to cling to or seek (p.41). The poet floats in the living universe like the moon in mist, or a child in the womb, his body glowing with a "Strange electric life"—energy free of the illusions of form: "Power is only insight/Into the void—the single/Thought that illuminates the heart" (pp. 42-45). Or as Rexroth explained to me, "Shakti, the Hindu syzygy 'power,' in Buddhism is prajna, 'wisdom,' which obliterates power." Observing a "Spider's net of jewels" he realizes that this
Transcendent architecture
Lost in the forest where no one passes
Is Itself the Net of Indra,
The compound infinities of infinities,
The Flower Wreath,
Each universe reflecting
Every other, reflecting
Itself from every other,
And the moon the single thought
That populates the Void (p. 45).

Finally, a soundless flute playing in “the circle of dancing gopis”—Krishna’s milkmaids—intimates the Tantric Absolute, the Shingon Adi-Buddha (note on page 84).

Tantric ecstasy flows from On Flower Wreath Hill into The Love Poems of Marichiko (first published in 1978), the last section of The Morning Star and the finale or Rexroth’s lifework. He went to great pains, in notes and public readings, to present these poems as translations, but confided to a few friends that he had made them up entirely himself. These intense short poems of desire, bliss, and separation are in novelistic sequence, but they tell more than a story of Marichiko’s love. She yearns to embrace her lover as the Bodhisattvah Kannon might embrace him with her thousand arms. After a “flood of light” implies the union of the pre-Buddhist goddess Marishi-ben (who entered Tachikawa Shingon) with the universal Buddha Dainichi Nyorai (Mahāvairochana), she is alone, perishing (pp. 75 and 88). In union, she was Dainichi’s wisdom; but apart, the lover is “random”—for the universe is composed of changing forms of energy (p. 79). (Rexroth’s notes richly indicate Tantric and other Buddhist sources.) She faces death, hating daylight, a reminder of ecstatic enlightenment, which passes like everything else. Marichiko, Rexroth’s modern Japanese embodiment of the ancient goddess, seems modelled in part on the poet Yosano Akiko, who edited (with her husband “Tekkan”) Myōjō, the influential journal of the new Romanticism. Translating this title as The Morning Star, Rexroth took it for his last book of poems, his fullest expression of Tantric realization. Akiko-Marichiko enters Rexroth’s Pantheon of musesaviors, rising from Nature and embodying Wisdom (Prajna). Through contemplative union with them, he passed into great Nirvana, leaving his poetry as a way of waking up.
KÜKAI: MANTRA AND POETRY

Rexroth urged me to write English versions of Kükai's poems with Murakami Sensei. They had moved him ever since he had learned Chinese and Japanese, and studied Buddhism, half a century before. I had already absorbed some Tantra from Tibetan lamas who had initiated me, from Fukuoka Shinoh Sensei of Enshoji in Osaka, from Hakeda Yoshito Sensei's definitive book on Kükai, and from other scholarly and literary works.

I learned from Kükai that the True Word, or mantra, “Ah!” is the first letter of the Sanskrit alphabet, the “seed-syllable” and “mother” of all other sounds, languages, poetry, and thought, a symbol of prāna (life force) and of Dainichi Nyorai. Moreover, “Ah!” is Dainichi, embodiment of universal Truth.

How can this be?

Pondering Kükai's claims, I heard “Ah!” and very similar sounds in words of religious importance in several languages: in Mahāvairochana (five times), Kannon, Buddha, twice each in mantra, Dharma, Samgha, and Nirvāna, and four times each in Mahayana and Vajrayana; in Vedanta also; twice each in Atman and Brahman, and four times in Mahatma Gandhi. And in non-Indian languages: the English God (in a common American pronunciation); the Hebrew Jahweh, Yashua (Jesus' original name), and Amen; the Arabic Allāh and Mohammed; the Egyptian Amon-Ra (the sun-god); and coming down to earth: in Mama and Papa. The last example is not frivolous when we recall Tantric imagery of sexual union of the feminine principle of wisdom and the masculine principle of compassionate skillful means (illustrated in Tibetan Thanka paintings of Yab-yum). But of course only a Buddhist linguist could validate the full experiential significance of “Ah!” in various languages.

Not only is “Ah!” heard in many words of religious significance: chanting the sound we become aware of how it rises from the silent void and returns to it—as all other voiced sounds do. It is an archetype for all speech. And just as “Ah!” rises from silence, so does the meaning of Dainichi rise from sound and dissolve as the sound returns to the void. In this mantra, we contemplate how the mystery of speech emerges from the mysteries of body (sound) and mind (meaning). Because the meaning is temporary, insubstantial, and dependent, we are warned by Kükai (in the sixth poem of “Poems That Sing Ten Images”) not to become attached to it, or to anything at all:
SINGING IMAGE OF AN ECHO

In an empty hall of a mouth or canyon
A voice or echo arises from vibrations of the air.
Foolish and wise ones hear it in different ways
As if anger and pleasure are really different.
Seeking the origin, we find that things have no essence.
All is unborn, imperishable, and has no beginning or end.
Stay in the one mind of no discrimination.
Voice and echo only deceive the ears.

So our voices die, but they echo—in mantra—Dainichi Nyorai. Distrusting the spoken word, which passes away, we contemplate the "eternal word" echoed by it. As Kūkai says in his first poem, "Singing Image of a Phantom": "Rising above the world, return to the palace of the eternal word, 'Ah!'" The void is embodied in the form of "Ah!" precisely because the form is void. Or as Kūkai says in the tenth poem:

SINGING IMAGE OF A WHIRLING RING OF FIRE

Whirling fire becomes a square and a circle as the hand move
Many changes are made according to our will.
One eternal word, "Ah!" turns into many others
Expressing innumerable Buddha-truths.

So the seed-syllable is a void-form—like a phantom, heat-waves, a dream, a shadow in a mirror, Gandharva castle in the sky, a water-moon, foam, an imaginary flower. Kūkai derived these images for the other poems in the sequence—images of ephemerality, insubstantiality, illusion, and void—from The Mahāvairocana Sutra (Dainichi-Kyo) and I-Hsing’s Commentary on the Sutra (excerpts translated in our book). I-Hsing explains that in chanting "Ah!" we should meditate on whirling fire, so as not to be attached to the sounded syllable, and to realize that word and fire arise from the Buddha-mind (page 67).

Kūkai’s poems and theory of mantra illuminate the origin of language and poetry: how words rise from silent voice, are void, and return to silence. This process is revealed more clearly in short Japanese forms such as tanka and haiku than in typically longer discursive poems in English. But thanks to the new Buddhist consciousness emerging in the West, suggestive short poems in English have been produced since the Imagist movement before World War I—and even
before that by Emily Dickinson and others. Poets are becoming increasingly aware of breathing, voicing, imaging the ephemerality of phenomena, rendering forms of void in void-forms. The words of such poets are compassionate skillful means embodying the void of wisdom—true words, like mantra.

Before concluding with a sequence of my own "one-breath poems," I wish to apologize for any errors in my presentation to this erudite assembly. In passing from India, through China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, and other Asian countries to Europe and America, Buddha Dharma has been revealed in many ways, often through confusion and misunderstanding. Let us help one another, and others, discover True Words of Compassionate Wisdom, in both ancient and modern, Asian and Western, poetry.

ONE-BREATH POEMS BY MORGAN GIBSON

The night is too quiet
for words.
Is only the Buddha
awake?
* 
In the dark wind
I forgot I stood
in the dark wind.
* 
The air
waits
to be breathed.
* 
A poem.
A breath.
* 
Sinking.
Singing.
* 
Are these words
in or
out of mind?
*
Where are we going
Sitting still so long?
*
Where are we
if not here?
*
I know nothing
of you.
Do you
know nothing of me?
*
Knowing pain
like a difficult
friend.
*
Sickening
in the dark world
till the bright word.
*
How strange.
My life.
No other.
*
You are as bright
as the moon
and as clouded.
*
Doing nothing
before the fire
fills the night.
*
The light
of not trying
for light.
*
Clouds of the mind
drift on.
I touch the sky
with my tongue.

* 

Where
did
I
go
?

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