



An Interdisciplinary Journal

<http://www.netsoljournal.net/>

Volume 3, Issue 1, pp.1-15, Spring 2018

<https://doi.org/10.24819/netsol2018.01>

Learning from the Pine and the Bamboo: Bashō as a Resource in Teaching Japanese Philosophy

Stephen C. Leach

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Abstract

In American universities, even Asian Philosophy is still often taught following methods adapted from European universities of the nineteenth century. Whether or not this approach is well-suited to philosophy as it was conceived in that era, it is inadequate if the aim is to develop a deep appreciation of Japanese philosophy. To limit what we consider Japanese philosophy to only what bears a distinct resemblance to academic Western philosophy, and accordingly to approach Japanese philosophy purely theoretically, is to risk missing the greater part. Much of Japanese philosophy is *applied* philosophy, or in other words, what Pierre Hadot calls a “way of life,” and to appropriate it meaningfully requires practice rather than mere intellectual study alone. Thus, I contend that a proper means for introducing Western students is a more holistic method grounded in practicing traditional arts, such as composing haiku. I argue that the seventeenth century poet Matsuo Bashō can serve as a valuable resource in this process. I conclude with a description of the methods that I use in my efforts at teaching Japanese philosophy to undergraduate university students in South Texas.

Key Words: Matsuo Bashō, Japanese Philosophy, Asia, Japan, Philosophy

Introduction

Traditional Western Philosophy is frequently taught following methods adapted from European universities of the nineteenth century – i.e., a series of lectures and discussions based on texts consisting of reasoned argument. (If students are lucky, they may get the chance to participate in a guided question-and-answer session, inaccurately labelled “the Socratic Method”) However, well suited this may be for understanding Kant or Hegel, it seems misguided when approaching Japanese Philosophy.

Much of the philosophical work in Japan since the Meiji Restoration might seem *prima facie* well-suited to standard Western philosophic methodology. Plausibly, the work of the Kyoto School, the famous twentieth-century group that deliberately applied Western philosophic



approaches to traditional, pre-modern themes, could fall into this category. Japanese thought has a long history, however, and I contend that a much better approach to Japanese thought in large is to open up the notion of what we consider philosophy, and what we consider its proper method. If the aim of studying philosophy in general, and Japanese philosophy in particular, is some sort of personal transformation, rather than being primarily a means of acquiring information, strategies other than those typically practiced in Western universities make sense. I will argue that one of these sensible strategies is the practice of writing poetry after the example of the seventeenth century haiku master, Matsuo Bashō.

“Philosophy” West and East

The Western style of Philosophy is a relatively recent import to Japan. In fact, the term now used to translate “philosophy”, *tetsugaku*, or “science of wisdom-seeking,” was coined in 1874 precisely to refer to what was considered an imported activity. It seems obvious, however, the Japanese were not innocent of “wisdom-seeking” itself until Japan’s “opening” to the West; even that theoretical style of philosophy recognizable in the West appears in the eighth century CE with Kūkai, for instance. However, a large part of Japanese “philosophical” activity, when interpreting that term broadly, has been manifested not in abstract theory, but in praxis, such as writing poetry, practicing calligraphy, the tea ceremony, and myriad similar examples.

Often even the theorizing is couched in works of art that bear little resemblance to rational debate. As an example, consider the concept of *mujo*, or “impermanence.” This is undoubtedly one of the most important concepts in Buddhist philosophy, and yet among the finest explorations of this theme in Japanese are not theoretical arguments in any traditional sense. Rather, the interested reader is recommended to an “occasional” work by Kamo no Chōmei (1155–1216) called “Ten-Foot Square Hut” and a book of scattered ruminations by Yoshida Kenkō (1284 – 1350) called “Essays in Idleness.” The former begins in journalistic mode with a sensational recounting of recent catastrophes, including earthquakes and conflagrations, and then pivots to an account of the construction of the titular hut, ending in praise of what might be called the “simple life”. The latter, as Lance Morrow describes it, is “an eccentric, sedate and gemlike assemblage of... thoughts on life, death, weather, manners, aesthetics, nature, drinking, conversational bores, sex, house design, the beauties of understatement and imperfection” (Morrow, 2011).

On the surface, writers like Chōmei or Kenkō or, for that matter, Bashō, might seem to chafe when placed under the rubric of “philosophy”, but this begs the question: what do we actually mean by the term “philosophy”? This, of course, is itself a philosophical question. Historically, the term in the West has denoted works that span a broad spectrum, from arid ratiocination to murky wisdom-literature, and all manner of “philosophers” from the logical analyst to the magus. Where should we focus on this spectrum?

In standard Western university programs, the focus of study is generally on argument; for purposes of mastering the intricacies of Kant’s or Hegel’s thought, this may be both necessary and sufficient. For understanding the transformative quality of Ancient Western philosophy, however, this approach may be less than sufficient, if still necessary, and there are reasons to suspect that this is even truer of Japanese philosophy writ large. Thus, to limit what we consider Japanese philosophy to just what bears a pronounced resemblance to academic Western philosophy, and thereby approach Japanese philosophy purely theoretically, may risk missing the greater part.



In fact, missing the greater part of Asian philosophy seems to have been a common mistake for those who best exemplify the standard professorial model. It is perhaps no coincidence that Immanuel Kant and G.W. Friedrich Hegel, to choose but two examples, exemplify both the standard model of “best practices” according to their philosophical methods, and the still too-frequent discounting of Eastern philosophy as a serious discipline.

Kant’s appraisal of “Oriental” philosophy is astonishing in its dismissiveness: “Philosophy is not to be found in the whole Orient” (Defoort, 2006). Hegel’s estimation, despite the inclusion of some favorable remarks about China in his lectures on the history of philosophy, is similarly harsh. For example, “one looks in vain for speculative philosophy in Confucius’ works, for he was merely a practical statesman”; furthermore, “his moral teachings are good and honest...but nothing more than that.... He was definitely not a speculative thinker” (Kim, 1978, pp. 173-180). In Kant’s particular case, it can be argued that his disavowal of the possibility of an “Oriental” philosophy is tied to his atrocious racial theories; this is the track taken by Bryan W. Van Norden in a recent essay (Norden, 2018), and a review of Kant’s remarks on race by Mark Larrimore (Larrimore, 1999, pp.99-125) buttresses this view.

Even in contemporary times, philosophers who should, perhaps, know better, such as Jacques Derrida, still claimed that “(p)hilosophy is related to some sort of particular history, some languages, and some ancient Greek invention.... It is something of European form” (Defoort, 2006). (We should note that Derrida does not find the lack of “philosophy” in the East to be particularly regrettable, however—he likens it to the absence of *taijiquan* in the West—i.e., something of inessential import.)

We need not commit to this myopic view of philosophy, nor of the methods appropriate to teaching it, however. In this essay, I argue that a humble study of the seventeenth century poet Matsuo Bashō can reward students with a meaningful, even transformative, philosophical encounter. Simply following Bashō faithfully will not provide a fool-proof and painless method for acquiring the sum total of Japanese philosophy, of course. I argue, however, that practicing an approximation of Bashō’s poetic discipline can lead us to living in a more thoughtful, less artificial manner, and thereby prepare us to better subjectively appropriate the message of several proper Japanese philosophers whose academic significance is unquestioned. In closing, I will briefly describe the efforts that my students, many of whom are just embarking on the study of philosophy of any kind, take toward this end.

Ancient Western Philosophy as a Way of Life

In his lectures at the Collège de France in 1981-82, Michel Foucault distinguished two forms of Western philosophy, both of which have roots in the person of Socrates. On the one hand, there is the strain famously dedicated to following the inscription at Delphi, “Know Yourself” (*gnōthi seauton*); on the other, there is also a long tradition of self-care (*epimeleia heautou*). The former gives the pattern for theoretical philosophy, or what is considered philosophy proper in most academic quarters (especially after what Foucault calls the “Cartesian Turn”); the latter, expressed by the Socratic schools such as the Stoics and Epicureans (and later, with considerable alteration, by Christian ascetics), involves much besides pure ratiocination; therapeutic concerns play a major role. Foucault’s claim, perhaps surprisingly, is that the importance of the latter often outweighed the significance of the former for the first thousand years of philosophy in the West:



Now not always, but often, and in a highly significant way, when this Delphic precept (this gnōthi seauton) appears, it is coupled or twinned with the principle of “take care of yourself” (epimeleia heautou).... In actual fact, it is not entirely a matter of coupling. In some texts...there is, rather, a kind of subordination of the expression of the rule “know yourself” to the precept of the care of the self. The gnōthi seauton...appears, quite clearly and again in a number of significant texts, within the more general framework of the epimeleia heautou (care of oneself) as one of the forms, one of the consequences, as a sort of concrete, precise, and particular application of the general rule: You must attend to yourself, you must not forget yourself, you must take care of yourself (Foucault, 2006, pp. 2-3).

The lines between theoretical and transformative approaches becomes sharper in the work of Pierre Hadot, Foucault’s colleague. Hadot distinguishes philosophy as a set of discourses (the standard academic model) from philosophy as a *bios* or “way of life,” which is how Ancient philosophy in the West was primarily viewed by its practitioners. The latter “vital, existential dimension” provides the impetus and the context for the theoretical discourses that in our time are often taken as the greater part of philosophy, if not the whole. Physics for the Epicureans and Stoics was not a subject for dispassionate study, however; it served the spiritual purpose of helping one live life more wisely. Due to societal changes, even philosophy professors have somehow forgotten this; in fact, they may be especially prone to forgetting this. The idea of emulating, or even of becoming, a “sage” as a serious life choice has been drained from philosophy in the academy. Hadot’s assessment is wry:

One of the characteristics of the university is that it is made up of professors who train professors, or professionals who train professionals. Education was thus no longer directed toward people who were to become educated with a view to becoming fully developed human beings, but to specialists, in order that they might train other specialists.... In modern university philosophy, philosophy is obviously no longer a way of life or form of life unless it be the form of life of a professor of philosophy (Hadot 2013, pp. 270-71).

If I may offer an analogy, it is as if academic philosophy as regularly practiced until quite recently consisted in studying libretto only, and confusing that process with the rapturous experience of attending an actual opera. But as Thoreau says so well, “(t)o be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates...to solve some of the problems of life, not only theoretically, but practically” (Thoreau & Cramer, 2004, p. 14).

Hadot reminds us that what he calls “spiritual exercises,” such as the “practicing for death” that Socrates alludes to in the *Phaedo*, were once the main art of practicing philosophy, as opposed to just theory and disputation. (He considers three other categories of exercise, besides this one: learning to live, learning to dialogue, and learning to read.) “The word ‘spiritual,’” Hadot emphasizes, “is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism.” The aim, he claims, was to “(b)ecome eternal by transcending yourself” (Hadot & Davidson 2011).

Hadot also holds out some hope that this philosophical approach is capable of revival, despite its apparent eclipse since medieval times in the West. My efforts in teaching Japanese philosophy in the manner I here am attempting to justify are a small step in that direction. My



intent is not to abandon theory but to balance it by grounding it in practice, not to denigrate abstract discourse, but to reengage with philosophy as a way of living that gives this discourse meaning, and I find that Japanese poetry offers excellent avenues for this project.

Japanese Philosophy as a Way of Life

I believe that the “eclipse” of the model of philosophy as a way of life just sketched may not have occurred in the East in the same way, or at least not as definitively, or so early on, again due to historical circumstances. Hadot might have supported this thesis, in fact; he appears to be considering this notion in a passage quoted in Defoort’s article, where he addresses the possibility of “breaching the modern gap between East and West”: “It seems to me now that there really are troubling analogies between the philosophical attitudes of Antiquity and those of the East...” (Defoort, 2006).

Philosophical-*seeming* themes—impermanence, emptiness, the non-self—abound in Japanese poetic and dramatic literature, and underlie many of the traditional arts, even today. Did Japan keep the philosophical *bios* alive through such cultural practices, even with the advent of the academic style of philosophy? It may be that a cultural predisposition toward practice rather than mere theorizing characterizes Japanese “wisdom-seeking” throughout its history.

Rudolph Otto’s observation concerning Zen would support this: what is fundamental in understanding Zen is not an “idea,” but an “experience.” Given that it is primarily an *experience* that the practitioners seek, what Hadot calls “exercises” have long been considered as more important than theory. As Dōgen (1200-1253) famously stated, practice and enlightenment are “one.”

Thinking that practice and enlightenment are not one is no more than a view that is outside the Way [that is, deluded]. In the buddha-dharma, practice and enlightenment are one and the same. Because it is the practice of enlightenment, a beginner’s wholehearted practice of the Way is exactly the totality of original enlightenment (Dogen, Roshi, & Okumura, 1997, p. 30).

Perhaps much of what Francois Jullien says about China can transfer, understandably, to Japan:

(China) never constructed a world of ideal forms, archetypes, or pure essences that are separate from reality but inform it. It regards the whole of reality as a regulated and continuous process that stems purely from the interaction of the factors in play... (Jullien, 2004, p. 15).

This being the case, the aims of the Chinese thinker, and by extension the Japanese, also differs:

Setting out to illuminate the progress of things, by elucidating its internal coherence and in order to act in accordance with it, the Chinese sage never conceived of a contemplative activity that was pure knowledge (theorein), possessing an end in itself, or that it represented the supreme end (happiness) and was altogether disinterested. For him, the ‘world’ was not an object of speculation; it was not a matter of ‘knowledge’ on the one hand and ‘action’ on the other (Jullien, 2004).

If the sage did not view matters this way, should the student insist on it? It is more sensible to reinstate the concept of spiritual exercises as a proper pedagogical method when teaching Japanese philosophy.



Bashō as a Cultural Repository

Matsuo Bashō's fame is probably such that he needs no introduction, so I will offer only the barest of one. Born in Ueno in 1644 to a samurai family, Bashō entered feudal service but at the death of his master, Tōdō Yoshitada, began a life of wandering, even after acquiring considerable fame as a poet in a culture obsessed with poetry. Although he seemed proudest of his efforts at the form known as *renga*, the linked poetry written by multiple authors that was a refined pastime for the literati of the day, he was widely recognized in his lifetime as a master of what is now known as *haiku*. A great artist, Bashō both epitomized the haiku form and transcended it through innovation. His travel journals, which blend prose with exquisite verse, are among the finest examples of that literary genre. Significantly, Bashō "lived" his art as well as spinning verses. Despite his fame, he chose to reside in relative seclusion in a hut on the outskirts of Edo, after Chomei's pattern; from time to time, he abandoned even this stability, instead wandering the byways of Japan in emulation of the poet-priest Saigyō (1118-1190), whom he revered. Both poetry and lifestyle were aspects of the "Way" for Bashō; as Sam Hamill writes, "Bashō believed literature provided an alternative set of values, which he called *fūga-no-michi*, the "Way of Elegance." He claimed that his life was stitched together "by the single thread of art" which permitted him to follow 'no religious law' and no popular customs" (Matsuo & Hamill 1999, p. xxv).

All of this is very interesting in its own right, perhaps, but it may be unclear why I think Bashō is pedagogically valuable in approaching Japanese philosophy. I will address this concern here. First, there is an uncontroversial sense in which a poet like Bashō may serve as a resource in teaching philosophy, and there is a stronger sense, in which Bashō's poetry itself can be understood as philosophical in its own right: I argue for both of these.

Since the first sense requires less explication, I begin there, with an analogy taken from a more familiar Western source. Philosophers regularly borrow from poets and other artists and artisans in making their arguments, certainly; in many cases, poets return the favor (consider Aristophanes, for instance.) Plato's *Symposium* can be, and sometimes surely still is, read as a series of arguments that are merely clothed in the unnecessary, but appealing trappings of a work of fiction. By deliberately paring away all that makes it so interesting to the casual reader, the theoretical elements can be brought to the fore; but to read it this way, I think, is to misread it. To attend meaningfully to the dramatic elements, however, the reader requires some knowledge of Greek drama, as well as of ancient dining customs, the Mantic practice, Athenian sexual mores, Hippocratic medicine, and the classical rhetorical tradition of delivering a proper eulogy, among many other particulars. These are customs that make up the cultural ground out of which the *bios* grows, even when the philosophical life, as Hadot describes it, often runs counter to society's prevailing norms. (It is less clear whether Japanese philosophy appears consistently as antagonistic towards its cultural ground; in many cases, Japanese philosophers are more communitarian, and hold the traditional culture in higher esteem.) Thus, a fuller knowledge of Japanese cultural traditions should lead to a more satisfactory reading of specifically philosophic Japanese texts.

Although such knowledge might seem only ancillary, properly contextualizing the arguments the dialogue contains, if we keep Hadot's thesis in mind, proper reading would seem to require as deep an exposure to the form of life from which this remarkable work emanates as we can acquire. Thus, a robust education in Ancient Greek Philosophy should require an immersion

in Ancient Greek culture, to the extent such is possible in our day—one in which Euclid and Aeschylus are deemed as important as Aristotle and Plato are assumed to be. This education would also require the relevant “spiritual exercises.” In this way, a creative dialogue between the Athenian form of life and the philosopher’s way of life could develop; without it, the arguments lack a proper grounding. In the same way, studying a thinker from the Kyoto School, say, without some appreciation of the cultural background from which s/he springs, including the influence of a “mere” poet such as Bashō, would leave us far short of understanding.

Moreover, there are several places in Bashō’s work where he clearly references extant philosophic views. As a cultured Japanese person of the seventeenth century, Bashō is the inheritor of several rich streams of the Asian philosophic tradition. This inheritance shows most clearly in his travel journals. Confucianism is vividly instantiated in the pilgrimage to his mother’s grave; connections to Daoism (e.g., his reference to Zhuangzi’s famous butterfly dream), and to Shinto (e.g., the many shrine-visits and the moon-and flower-viewing excursions), and, of course, to Buddhism dot his texts. Bashō’s work opens windows on these traditions. There is a valuable secondary literature in English which explores these connections more fully, and which can offer a deeper plunge into the philosophical and religious underpinnings of his work, happily. These instances make Bashō pedagogically useful in the simple sense, as a gateway to discussion of philosophical positions that Bashō does not argue for explicitly, but that make up the milieu in which he works.

What I find much more interesting than Bashō as a philosophic resource in this simple sense, however, is the notion that Bashō might provide a means of approaching important elements of Japanese philosophy in general in the second sense: as a thinker committed to the philosophic *bios* in his own right. It is to that notion I will now turn.

Bashō as Poet-Philosopher

Makoto Ueda writes,

Bashō’s poetry, seen in its totality, reveals a lifelong effort to find a meaning in life... he probed deep into Taoism and Zen Buddhism. Eventually he found, or thought he found, what he sought in what he called fūga, an artist’s way of life, a reclusive life devoted to a quest for eternal truth in nature (Bashō & Ueda 1995, p. 4).

It is clear that Bashō’s students thought of him as something other than a mere wordsmith. His pupil Takarai Kikaku described him after his death this way:

This master was a lonely man and very poor, but his virtues were infinite. More than two thousand disciples in different parts of the country, far and near, had universal trust in him—something that goes beyond our usual understanding (Kikaku & Yuasa 2018).

James Foard informs us that Bashō was in fact “enshrined” as a *kami* a hundred years after his death, meaning he was a subject of literal worship, so great was his prestige. One of Bashō’s official titles was *Tōsei Reishin*, where “Reishin” translates as “Spirit Deity” (Tōsei being a pen name); he also was posthumously awarded the title “Religious Teacher of the Correct Style” (*Shōfu Shūshi*) (Foard 1976, p. 387).

Thus, there seems little doubt that Bashō was thought of not simply as a man gifted with poetic talent but as a philosophic-religious figure, the Master of *fūga-no-michi*, “the Way of Elegance.”



David Barnhill has done considerable work on the religious and philosophical aspects of Bashō's poetry. Along with the well-known Zen side to Bashō's makeup, and the lesser known, but still recognized Daoist element, he has analyzed Bashō's thought and life, particularly his habit of wandering, as a kind of determined discipline which has roots both in Pure Land Buddhism and in the ascetic and shamanistic traditions of *Shugendō* and *hijiri*. In Barnhill's view, Bashō sees "meditational Buddhist, classical Taoist, and shamanistic *yugyo hijiri* traditions...as three complementary streams, all of them part of one religious complex of ideas, attitudes, and practices" (Barnhill 2018, p. 6). Importantly for this project, Bashō puts this complex into play as a series of what we have been calling, after Hadot, "spiritual exercises," the application of which tends towards philosophical *bios* Foucault describes. As Barnhill says,

Bashō continued the medieval attitude that poetry is not just an artistic practice, but fundamentally a spiritual discipline. Concentration of mind, rectification of spirit, and ceaseless striving are required. Central to this discipline is the loss of "self" which results in makoto (genuineness) a term important in the Shinto, Confucian, and Buddhist traditions (Barnhill 2018, para. 2).

For Bashō, practicing poetry was a way of deepening awareness. In Ivan Granger's phrase, such a practice "summons the divine into the daily mind." Bashō sought to give himself wholly over to *fūga-no-michi*, whether through dwelling by choice in a hut on the outskirts of Edo or by wandering the countryside of Japan at the mercy of accident and the elements, with "bleached bones on his mind."

"Learning from the Pine and the Bamboo"

Although he might scoff being so categorized, Bashō represents a practitioner of the philosophic *bios* Hadot champions; no mere student of philosophy in its academic sense, he has something of philosophic import of his own to impart. What is the nature of his philosophic insight, and how might we best come to appropriate in a meaningful way?

We are lucky to have Bashō's own instruction, passed down to us by his disciple, Hattori Tohō (1657-1730). From Tohō's "Red Book": "The Master said, 'Learn of the pine from the pine, learn of the bamboo from the bamboo.' In other words, one must become detached from the self" (Barnhill 2018, para. 11). The first part of this formula appears to be advocating an empirical or observational approach to phenomena that is easy to grasp; it reminds one of Lu Chi's famous dictum "(w)hen cutting an axe handle with an axe, surely the model is at hand" (Lu and Hamill 2000). Bashō and Tohō are asking that we go beyond mere observation, however, and toward a sort of meditative identification with the natural objects that populate haiku, as Tohō explains: "To learn means to enter into the object and to feel the subtlety that is revealed there.... The color of the mind becomes the object (Barnhill 2018, para. 4).

The second half of the formula involves immersing ourselves meditatively in the "mind" of Bashō as he chooses to present it through his poetry and prose, a process that, while it clearly goes beyond mere familiarity with his work, must begin there. Tohō states:

Disciples simply should strive ceaselessly to realize the Master's mind, thus elevating their own mind, and then returning to what is at hand, pursue haikai. If they seek the Master's mind relentlessly, their own mind will become tinged with its hue and scent.... Those who pursue the Master's mind by probing and searching in the end will be on the path to detachment from the self (Barnhill 2018, para. 13).



Self-detachment, which Tohō calls “foundation building” and the “motto” of those who follow the *fuga* (poetic) spirit, results through the non-duality of subject and object in *makoto*, or “genuineness,” the quality of being creative in the way that nature itself is creative, an ego-less or subject-free creativity, where “something is done with nothing being done.” As Barnhill says, “One who has lost the artificial self and achieved unity with the object has *makoto*” (Barnhill 2018, para. 4). Watsuji Tetsuro (1889-1960) of the famous twentieth century Kyoto School of philosophy considered this quality the root, not just of poetic genuineness, but of all truthfulness, honesty, and trustworthiness; it implies spiritual purity, and the completion and perfection of the individual.

“Learning from the pine and bamboo” in this way involves entering into the realm of something like what Gabriel Marcel called “Mystery”: “...a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and its initial validity” (Marcel 1949, p. 117). This clearly points to a state that goes beyond mere intellectual comprehension, and tends toward transformation through subjective appropriation. One does not possess a theoretical understanding of such a process any more than one “solves” a Zen *kōan* as if it were merely a riddle.

Masao Abe (1915-2006), another thinker aligned with the Kyoto School, describes an experience of “awakening to emptiness” which seems very close to this: “When you realize your own suchness, you realize the suchness of everything at once. A pine tree appears in its suchness. Bamboo manifests itself in its suchness. Everything is realized in its distinctiveness” (Franck 2004, pp. 206-207). In his formulation, self-care (self-actualization) entails the “death” of the ego-self. Abe prefaces his description this revelation thus:

We must realize there is no unchanging, eternal ego-self... Awakening to emptiness, which is disclosed through the death of the ego, one realizes one's 'suchness'... in this realization you are no longer separated from yourself, but are just yourself. No more, no less. There are no gaps between you and yourself: you become you. (Franck 2004, pp. 296-207)

Kitarō Nishida (1870-1945), the founder of the Kyoto School, argued for a faculty he called “acting intuition,” and something like this may be at work here, also. Acting intuition is a transformative approach to reality in which intuition is cultivated to the point of “conversion” to make possible a spontaneous and creative (in-) action, reminiscent of the Daoist concept of *wu wei*. Nishida’s description of this conversion is “knowing a thing by becoming it,” and the result is a “seeing without a seer.” The clearest exposition of this fraught concept of which I am aware is that by James Heisig:

In all knowing, there is not only an active, reflective grasp of things but a passive intuition in which one is grasped by things. But for their synthesis to function as a logical universal of self-awareness, a conversion must take place. It must not be a matter of allowing mental intuition to completely overwhelm mental action, but of cultivating a new relationship in which intuition becomes active and action becomes passive. In other words, intuition has to be deliberately cultivated as a way of acting on the world, participating in the world's dynamic by expressing it in creative form, without interposing the subject-object dichotomy on it. Acting intuition thus amounts to purging the self of its Fichtean ego.... (Heisig 1990, p. 63).

It should be recognized that Nishida’s concept of “pure experience” which underlies this dialectic has been subject to recent criticism by Robert Sharf and others on grounds that such orientation toward experience *per se* is due in large part to Nishida’s desire to speak convincingly

to a Western audience, particularly one already primed to valorize “experience” along the lines drawn by Western philosophers of religion such as William James (e.g., Sharf 2000, p.275). Although this caveat should be borne in mind when assessing the works of those Japanese philosophers, like Nishida, Suzuki, *et al*, who work in a post-Meiji world, it lies outside the scope of this paper to address this debate; instead, I point the interested reader to Sharf’s article for further insight.

Similarities, as well as profound differences, with this dialectical movement can be discerned in the thought of Nishida’s celebrated successor, Keiji Nishitani (1900-1990). In his *Religion and Nothingness*, Nishitani describes a pattern of double-negation that he considers essential to understanding the “self,” a pattern which is inspired by Nietzschean perspectivism, but grounded in a genuinely Buddhist standpoint. Again, Heisig sums up this view:

The ordinary, pre-awakened self is the ego of self-consciousness that sets itself up outside the world of things as a knowing subject. This is the standpoint of egoity. Driven by death and an awareness of the impermanence of all things to see the abyss that yawns underfoot of ordinary egoity, one awakens to an initial sense of the vanity of the world... (nihility), a conversion to a standpoint of nothingness.... (Heisig 1990, p. 76).

This standpoint is temporary, though; the negation is negated in the sense that nihility is recognized as non-ultimate. Then, according to Nishitani,

...a final standpoint is opened up, the standpoint of emptiness in which all things appear just as they are, in their “suchness,” and in which the true self is seen to reside not in the workings of egoity but in a letting go of ego (Heisig 1990, p. 76).

As Robert Carter puts it,

The ego cannot be our center focus if we are to advance to authenticity; rather, we must discover our selfless no-mindedness. The self of non-selfhood is another-centered, rather than self- or ego-centered. The result is a subjectivity of no-selfhood-selflessness as a nonduality of self and other. (Nishitani, Carter, & Yamamoto 2006, p. 13).

This is heady stuff, certainly, and the intricacies of these arguments probably would not appeal very much to many beginning students of Japanese philosophy—but luckily, the process looks to be the same as what the disciples of Bashō understood through their poetic practice. Experience suggests that many students are skeptical about the spiritual value of simply reading and discussing abstract philosophy untied to any personal use, and this is true whether it is Eastern or Western philosophy; perhaps may be another side-effect of disengaging the theoretic aspects of philosophy from the *bios* that used to accompany it. However, many students respond immediately to the charm of poetry, especially when it can appear, at least at the beginning, to have some sort of vague “spiritual” or “enlightening” quality. Perhaps poetry can be a “spiritual exercise” that aims at philosophical insight in the same way that the meditations of the Stoics or the *ascesis* of the Desert Fathers did, before the eclipse Hadot describes.

Practicing Haiku as a “Spiritual Exercise”

There are important differences worth exploring between the modes of expression of the various members of the Kyoto school discussed above, yet they all seem to agree that one of the important ends of philosophic thinking is to achieve a certain transformative vision of the world, a vision wherein the subject is in a state beyond ego and yet fully present, and in which all things



reveal themselves in their suchness. After consideration, we may conclude that this condition, which Carter calls “authenticity,” seems nothing other than what Bashō’s disciples knew as *makoto*, “genuineness.” Happily, this virtue seems to be something that can be cultivated through poetic practice, when it is mindful.

By following Bashō’s example, even in our radically different material and cultural circumstances, my students at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley are led to practice some of his “spiritual discipline,” the effect of which, ideally, is to inculcate the virtue of “genuineness”.

To be sure, there are other remarkable figures who might serve just as well as a model in this endeavor: Sen no Rikyū, the legendary tea master, is a viable candidate, for instance. Even Bashō would seem to agree, for he notes that the same “thread” runs through his art as through Bashō’s own. From *Knapsack Notebook*: “Saigyō’s waka, Sōgi’s renga, Sesshu’s painting, Rikyū’s tea ceremony—one thread runs through the artistic ways. And this aesthetic spirit is to follow the Creative, to be a companion to the turning of the four seasons” (Bashō & Barnhill 2005, p. 29). Unfortunately, serving tea after the pattern of Rikyū requires not just material resources that may not be readily available to every student, but considerable technique; the same goes for painting, for flower arranging (*ikebana*) and typical Zen arts such as fencing (*kendo*) and archery (*kyūdō*.) The practice of poetry can begin immediately. Moreover, there is something about poetry, much like music, that seems to speak directly to the heart-mind in a way many other arts do not. The poet Witter Bynner, an early enthusiast of Chinese style poetry in the West, wrote:

Music may be the most intimate of the arts.... Except for simple melodies, music is beyond the reach of any individual who is not a technician. Painting and sculpture...are for the most part accessible only to the privileged or those who make pilgrimages. Poetry more than any other of the arts may be carried about by a man either in his remembering heart or else in compact and easily available printed form. It belongs to anyone. It is of all the arts closest to a man.... (Bynner & Hengtanguishi 1964, p. xv).

Despite technological advances since Bynner’s day, there is perhaps still truth in this. For these reasons, my classroom strategy is to follow Bashō’s example and pursue the *philosophic* goal of “genuineness” through *poetic* discipline. The exercises we follow in my classes fall along two lines, both of which are derived from Bashō’s advice to Tohō, and both of which play on themes Hadot associates with philosophy as a *bios*. Through analyzing a number of Bashō’s haikus, students gain insight into “the master’s mind,” as Tohō describes the process, and thereby “elevate” their own minds. Next, “returning to what is at hand,” they practice attention to the natural world through the focusing lens of haiku composition. The objective is to cultivate a greater awareness of what Bashō (above) called “the Creative” (*zoka*, in Japanese) the generative force of nature.

A major aspect of this endeavor involves amassing a collection of “season words” (*kigo*, in Japanese.) *Kigo* were traditionally a requirement for a well-turned haiku; Bashō at one point criticized a poem he wrote while in a desultory mood precisely because it lacked a *kigo*. Modernist poets sometimes deliberately omit *kigo*, composing *muki* or “seasonless” haiku, but the practice remains controversial; poet Robert Wilson, for instance, has argued that the seasonal *kigo* is necessary to ground haiku in what Bashō called *zoka*, or “creative nature,” and concludes, “(w)ithout *zoka*, haiku is not haiku (Wilson, 2012, p.8)”. The importance of these terms for poetic composition gave rise to the phenomenon of *saijiki*, the classical compendium of seasonal terms



and associated images, which poets regularly consulted and by whose dictates they were expected to abide. These *saijiki* were well suited to the seventy-two traditional seasons of the Japanese experience, naturally, but so do not transfer readily to our present circumstances.

The South Texas region features more *cano* and mesquite than actual pine or bamboo, and our ability to appreciate the change of seasons is somewhat reduced due to our climate. (Border walls and immigration officers also make for hardships when it comes to free and easy wandering in this region.) Thus, the need to develop our own “season words” arises, and this necessitates exposure to the natural world outside classroom walls. Whereas the traditional haiku poet could rely on a corona of images and allusions surrounding, for instance, the word *hototogisu* (the name for the lesser cuckoo in Japanese), poets on the US/Mexico border must discover, or invent, a new set of meanings to better align with the chachalaca or the great kiskadee. In attending carefully to the flora and fauna around us, and thereby developing *kigo* appropriate for the lives *we* lead, we can hope to become more at one with *our* place, and become more aware of the natural spaces which we regularly *inhabit*, but in which we rarely choose to *dwell*. “To learn means to enter into the object and to feel the subtlety that is revealed there,” as Basho, through Toho’s recollection, has already established; it is also the first step in “becoming detached from the self.”

This practice becomes even more effective when we turn from practicing haiku in general to practicing the poetic discipline known as *jisei*, or “death poems.” The custom of writing a poem at the threshold of death was a long-standing tradition among poets, samurai, and monks. A famous early example appears in the ninth century *Ise Monogatari*; the custom acquired legs, and *jisei* by liberally educated *kamikaze* pilots can even be found in Texas on a captured battle flag at the National Museum of the Pacific War.

Bashō’s final poem is considered by many to be his *jisei*. It reads as follows:

*Sick on a journey—
over parched fields
dreams wander on.* (Bashō & Stryck, 1985)

Bashō wrote this poem as he was dying from stomach disease, and so it quite literally counts as a “death poem,” but according to Bashō’s disciples, their master had no need of really composing a particular *jisei* for the occasion, as Bashō “constantly thought about his end and wrote poems expressing his premonitions of death. Therefore he did not have to write any poem of farewell on his death bed” (Kikaku & Yuasa 2018, para.20).

In the *Phaedo*, as noted earlier, Plato has Socrates say that he believes in some sense philosophy is learning to die. Hadot, as we have seen, fixes on this remark, and establishes that as one of the hallmarks of the philosophic *bios*: the philosopher’s way of life requires a “dying” to the values and the demands of the very society that gave rise to the philosophic individual. This “dying” takes a particularly individualistic turn in the West, and results in an antagonistic relationship between the non-philosophic societal background and the philosophical practitioner of “self-care,” as the fate of Socrates attests. Foucault, as we have seen, gave a voice to Western philosophy when it cried, “You must attend to yourself, you must not forget yourself.” Japanese philosophers, attuned to the Buddhist doctrine of No-Self and to the Confucian contextualized self, frequently view the single individual isolated from society as derivative or as an aberration, and should be expected to manifest this tension differently. For these thinkers, as for Bashō’s disciples, attending to the self takes the form of “forgetting” the self. The pursuit of *makoto*, involving as it

does a self-detachment and a merging of subject and object, certainly could be described as a kind of “dying”, however. Thus, the practice of embracing *mujo* through mindful composition of *jisei* would seem the Eastern analogue to the “spiritual practices” of the Ancient Western philosophers that Hadot describes.

Thus, by sustained practice in writing *jisei*-themed poetry, we advance sensitively towards a subjective appropriation of the reality of *mujo*. By contemplating death through the sharp focus of haiku composition, we learn to appreciate life not *despite*, but *because of*, its impermanence; in Japanese terms, we begin to grasp the world with a sense of *mono no aware*. In this way we, who are so far removed from Bashō’s world, can hope to *live* our philosophy, if only for a while and in part, and thereby claim a share of the profound spirit that animates one of Bashō’s most beautiful poems:

*A cicada shell–
it sang itself
utterly away (“A cicada shell”).*

Such embrace, replete with the wealth of resonance that imagination provides, gives life to our study of Japanese philosophy, and allows greater communion with its deepest insights.

References

- Barnhill, D. L. (2018, January 26). Basho-Journals. Retrieved from UW Faculty/Staff Sites: <http://www.uwosh.edu/facstaff/barnhill/es-244-basho/journals.pdf/view>
- Barnhill, D. L. (2018, January 26). Basho-Poetics. Retrieved from UW Faculty/Staff Sites: <http://www.uwosh.edu/facstaff/barnhill/es-244-basho/poetics.pdf/view>
- Barnhill, D. L. (2018, January 26). Basho-Treatises. Retrieved from UW Faculty/Staff Sites: <http://www.uwosh.edu/facstaff/barnhill/es-244-basho/treatises.pdf/view>
- Bashō, M., & Barnhill, D. L. (2005). *Basho's Journey: The Literary Prose of Matsuo Basho*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Bashō, M., & Hamill, S. (1999). *The Essential Bashō*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Bashō, M., & Stryck, L. (1985). *On Love and Barley - Haiku of Basho*. London: Penguin.
- Bashō, M., & Ueda, M. (1995). *Bashō and His Interpreters*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Bynner, W., & Hengtanguishi, K. J. (1964). *The Jade Mountain: A Chinese Anthology*. Garden City: Anchor Books.
- Defoort, C. (2006). Is "Chinese Philosophy" a Proper Name? A Response to Rein Raud. *Philosophy East and West*.
- Dogen, Roshi, K. U., & Okumura, S. (1997). *The Wholehearted Way: A Translation of Eihei Dogen's "Bendowa"*. Boston: Tuttle.
- Foard, J. (1976). The Loneliness of Matsuo Basho. In F. C. Reynolds, *The Biographical Process: Studies in the History and Psychology of Religion*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Foucault, M. (2006). *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France, 1981-1982*. New York: Picador.
- Franck, F. (2004). *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School and Its Contemporaries*. Bloomington: World Wisdom.
- Hadot, P. (2013). *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancients and Moderns*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Hadot, P., & Davidson, A. I. (2011). *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Heisig, J. W. (1990). The Religious Philosophy of the Kyoto School. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*.
- Jullien, F. (2004). *A Treatise on Efficacy: Between Western and Chinese Thinking*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
- Kikaku, T., & Yuasa, N. (2018, January 26). *An Account of Our Master's Last Days*. Retrieved from Simply Haiku: <http://simplyhaiku.com/SHv4n3/features/Nobuyuki.html>
- Kim, Y. K. (1978). Hegel's Criticism of Chinese Philosophy. *Philosophy East and West*, 173-180.

- Larrimore, M. (1999). Sublime Waste: Kant on the Destiny of the 'Races'. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*.
- Lu, J., & Hamill, S. (2000). *The Art of Writing: Lu Chi's Wen Fu*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions.
- Marcel, G. (1949). *Being and Having: A Translation by Katharine Farrer of Etre et Avoir*. Westminster: Dacre Press.
- Morrow, L. (2011, June). The Timeless Wisdom of Kenko. Retrieved from Smithsonian Magazine: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/the-timeless-wisdom-of-kenko-159972347/#bYxcylQjGtadp8XM.99>
- Nishitani, K., Carter, R. E., & Yamamoto, S. (2006). *On Buddhism*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Norden, B. W. (2018, January 8). Aeon Essays. Retrieved from Aeon: <https://aeon.co/essays/why-the-western-philosophical-canon-is-xenophobic-and-racist>
- Sharf, Robert H. (2000). "The Rhetoric of Experience and the Study of Religion". *Journal of Consciousness Studies*.
- Thoreau, H. D., & Cramer, J. S. (2004). *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*. New Haven: Yale.
- Wilson, Robert D. "The Colonization of Japanese Haiku." *Simply Haiku*, 2012. Retrieved from www.thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/680
- "A cicada shell." *Occupy Poetry*, www.occupypoetry.net/a_cicada_shell.