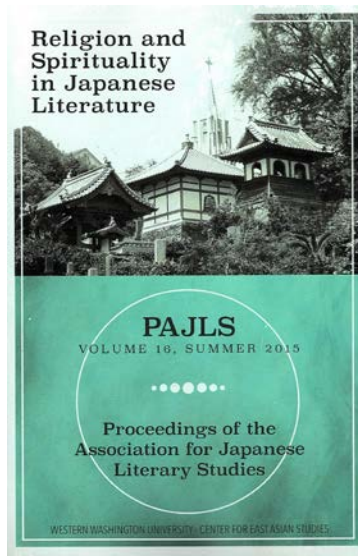


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Buddhist Verses in Classical Renga and the Performance of Impermanence

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Buddhist concepts and imagery played a major part in medieval linked verse, or *renga*, on two distinct levels. First of all, Buddhism was one of several verse categorizations along with other major categories such as love, laments, travel, and the four seasons. Buddhist verses appear in the *ha* or *kyū* portions of the *jo-ha-kyū*, or the prelude-development-denouement structure that characterizes *renga* sequences. These portions of a sequence feature a variety of topics with rapid transitions between them. The content of verses on Buddhist themes could be anything from a landscape with a temple in the scene, to an intimate expression of the feelings of a monk, to an impersonal affirmation of the greatness of the Buddhist dharma.

Secondly, *renga* poets also came to apply Buddhist philosophy more broadly to the principles of linking technique, viewing the rise and fall of various topics and voices within a *renga* sequence as an embodiment of the principle of impermanence. The following quote from *Sasamegoto*, a treatise on poetics by the *renga* master Shinkei, shows an example of this application:

...“temporality with each thought” [nennen no mujō], which permeates the mind before each and every phenomenon, belongs to the stage of the bodhisattva’s Great Enlightenment. The poet of such an unflagging discipline must be practically nonexistent.¹

Renga is an art full of the rise and fall of constantly changing phenomena, and in this way it naturally lends itself to the application of this poetics of impermanence (*mujō*). The rules of *renga* actually enforce a constant flux from one topic to another. One of *renga*’s signature characteristics is its prohibition of any logical or narrative continuity over the space of more than two verses. Each verse in *renga* must relate in some way to the verse immediately preceding it, but is not allowed to relate to the verse two verses before. There is then in *renga* an ephemeral and always changing present moment consisting of the verse most

¹ Translated by Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen in *Murmured Conversations: A Treatise on Poetry and Buddhism* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), 185.

recently composed, or the *tsukeku*, and the verse preceding it, or the *maeku*. As each new verse is composed, the *tsukeku* becomes the *maeku* in a new pair of verses, and the old *maeku* drops out of sight. (The old *maeku*, to which the new verse should not connect, is now called the *uchikoshi*.)

This progression can be seen in the opening four verses of *Yuyama sangin hyakuin*, a sequence composed by Sōgi, Shōhaku and Sōchō in 1491.

うす雪に木葉色こき山路哉 肖柏
岩もとすすき冬や猶みん 宗長
松虫にさそはれそめし宿出でて 宗祇
さ夜ふけけりな袖の秋かぜ 肖柏²

usuyuki ni ko no ha iro koki yamaji kana (Shōhaku)
iwamoto susuki fuyu ya nao min (Sōchō)
matsumushi ni sasowaresomeshi yado idete (Sōgi)
sayo fukekeri na sode no akikaze (Shōhaku)

On the mountain path
The leaves lie rich-colored
Under a thin snow. (Shōhaku)

Miscanthus at the crag's base—
In winter a still greater delight. (Sōchō)

By a pine cricket
First lured forth,
I left my dwelling. (Sōgi)

The night has grown late—
A fall wind blows my sleeves. (Shōhaku)³

The *hokku* or opening verse is a scene from early winter, while Sōchō's *wakiku* or second verse expands the scene from the first. The pine cricket in the third verse, however, is an autumn image; the speaker in the scene is now looking at winter scenery while remembering autumn. In the fourth verse the scene has fully shifted to autumn, and being lured by the pine cricket is now something that has happened a few hours ago, rather than a few months ago.

² Text from Kaneko Kinjirō, ed., *Rengashū, haikaishū*, Vol. 61, *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2001), 106-107.

³ Translated by Steven D. Carter in "Three Poets at Yuyama: Sōgi and Yuyama Sangin Hyakuin, 1491," *Monumenta Nipponica* 33.3 (1978), 241-83, the quote from 255.

This passage clearly shows the way in which the interpretation of a verse in *renga* shifts as it changes place in the sequence from one pair to the next. Flashes of scenes and perspectives of various characters are always coming fleetingly into view, only to disappear the next moment. Because of this, *renga* can be called a performance of impermanence in its very structure. In Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen's words,

The hundred-verse *renga* *hyakuin* neither narrates a continuous sequence of events nor delineates the nature of a particular feeling or thought through logical argument and poetic figures. Instead, various scenes, thoughts, and feelings are taken up for a moment only to be discarded in the next, without developing any one of them, so that nothing adds up to a total meaning.⁴

Ramirez-Christensen points out the obvious parallels between the structure of *renga* and the Buddhist construction of reality as follows:

[Dharmas/phenomena] are at base "empty"; their identity is constituted wholly in relation to other phenomena. The same is true...of the isolated *renga* verse...it does not become meaningful until the *tsukeku* provides it with a context. Thus *tsukeai*, the signifying event in *renga*, can be seen as a dynamic instance of dependent origination, or *engi*, the coming into appearance of phenomena, or meaning, through correlation.⁵

The word *tsukeai* refers to the act and the poetics of linking between verses in *renga* composition.

The structure of *renga* can similarly be considered in terms of Nishida Kitarō's theory of *basho*, or place/topos as the site of impermanence:

The fact that the world is changing means that the "that in which" is changing, and vice versa. To think of change in this way implies a structure which is a continuity of discontinuity. The world of change is the world of coming into being and passing away....⁶

Nishida speaks here of a dialectic between action and its locus/context, both of which are always changing. This dialectic forms a chain of particular events that both exemplifies and embodies the universality of nothingness, which for Nishida is tied in with the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā* and especially

⁴ Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen, *Emptiness and Temporality: Buddhism and Medieval Japanese Poetics* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2008), 11.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶ Nishida Kitarō, tr. David Dilworth, *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy: The World of Action and the Dialectical World* (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1970), 6.

the Zen concept of *mu. Renga*, with its flow of meanings that arise, change and disappear with the movement of a chain of elements acting in relation to each other, is like a microcosm of this “world of coming into being and passing away.”

Where I wish to build on the scholarship of Esperanza Ramirez-Christensen and others is in looking at how this structure of “coming into being and passing away” applies to Buddhist verses, which of course it does as much as to any other verse. In *renga* Buddhism becomes just one of a chain of many shifting topics, placed on an equal footing with all the other links in the chain, and the meanings of Buddhist utterances are often distorted or relativized as they are juxtaposed with verses on topics sometimes very far from Buddhism. I want to look at this encounter between the two levels of Buddhism contained within *renga*—that is to say, the often rather conventional Buddhist sentiments expressed in Buddhist verses, and the equally Buddhist-inspired application of the poetics of impermanence to *renga* as a whole. Ultimately, *renga* can be seen performing a deconstruction of Buddhism that is sanctioned by its Buddhist method of production.

This deconstruction occurs at an interesting point in the story of the place of Buddhism within Japanese poetry. A couple of centuries before the golden age of *renga* in the late 15th century, the idea that poetry and Buddhism could be compatible was still a somewhat controversial one: while waka on Buddhist topics had become common, poetry on conventional topics was still viewed by some as an engagement of passions that was ultimately incompatible with pursuit of the Buddhist path. By the late Muromachi and early Edo periods, however, Buddhist and specifically Zen philosophy had become inextricably intertwined with Japanese poetry. The role Buddhist concepts came to play in the poetics of *renga* can be seen as marking something of a turning point in this progression.

I now wish to turn to a few examples of Buddhist verses and examine how they fit within the larger flow of a *renga* sequence, and how *renga* poets transitioned between Buddhism and other topics. Classical *renga* poets used a wide variety of techniques to transition between topics. Early *renga* poets frequently used puns and verbal associations used to tie links together, and these wordplay-oriented techniques remained common during the height of classical *renga* under the masters Shinkei and Sōgi. But while verbal play might be the foundation of a link, there were often additional levels of linking at work as

well. Here is an example from the best-known *renga* sequence of all time, *Minase sangin hyakuin* (1488):

この岸をもろこし舟のかぎりにて 宗長
又むまれこぬ法をきかばや 肖柏⁷

kono kishi wo / morokoshibune no / kagiri nite (Sōchō)
mata mumarekonu / nori o kikabaya (Shōhaku)

Leaving this shore,
a boat stops for its last stop
before far Cathay. (Sōchō)

Ah, to hear of a Law
that could free one from rebirth! (Shōhaku)⁸

The first verse introduces the scene of a boat leaving on a journey. The second verse introduces a narrator for the scene pictured in the first verse, a monk setting off for China in search of new Buddhist texts. The mainstay of the link here, though, is a conventional association based on a pun. The boat in the first verse suggests “ride” (*nori*, 乗り), which in turn suggests a homophone, the Buddhist Dharma (also *nori*, 法). This association also contains a Pure Land allusion: the boat could be seen as the Vessel of the Law that carries believers over from this filthy world to the Pure Land. China also lies in the direction of the West, where the Pure Land is said to lie.

The technique used in this example of inserting a human figure into a scene is a common one, and another interesting way of linking is by changing that persona from one pair of verses to the next. Here is another example from *Minase sangin hyakuin*:

さびしさならふまつかぜのこゑ 肖柏
たれかこの暁おきをかさねまし 宗長
月はしるやの旅ぞかなしき 宗祇⁹

sabishisa narau / matsukaze no koe (Shōhaku)
tare ka kono / akatsukioki o / kasanemashi (Sōchō)
tsuki wa shiru ya no / tabi zo kanashiki (Sōgi)

⁷ Text from Shimazu Tadao, ed., *Rengashū* (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1979), 227.

⁸ Translated by Steven D. Carter in *Traditional Japanese Poetry: An Anthology* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1991), 315.

⁹ Text from Shimazu, *Rengashū*, 234.

One learns to bear solitude
from the sound of the pine-wind. (Shōhaku)

Who besides myself
might be arising at dawn
time upon time? (Sōchō)

Only the moon could know this—
how sad one is on a journey. (Sōgi)¹⁰

This first verse is an expression of stoic solitude. The second verse interprets the words of the first as coming from the mouth of a monk arising at dawn to begin his strict morning practice. The solitude becomes that of a devotee who has no peers in the sincerity of his practice, as well as no human companionship at the early morning hour when he rises. In the third verse, however, the voice of the monk turns into that of another common persona in *renga*, the homesick traveler, and the solitude into the loneliness of sleeping on the road on a solitary journey, with no companion but the waning moon still in the sky at dawn.

Sometimes the shift in the meaning of a verse as it changes position involves a shift in the implied valuation of a key element of the verse, from positive to negative or vice versa. In the following example from the *Nanimichi hyakuin* of 1453 by Sōzei and others, the first two verses are linked by an allusion, while the link between the second and the third incorporates a creative shift of this sort.

馴れにし犬ぞ杖におどろく 忍誓
老人や思ひの家を守るらん 宗砌
昔の歌の道はこのれり 行助¹¹

narenishi inu zo / tsue ni odoroku (Ninzei)
rōjin ya / omoi no ie o / mamoruran (Sōzei)
mukashi no uta no / michi wa nokoreri (Gyōjo)

The tamed dog
startles at the stick (Ninzei)

Does the old man
still guard the house
his heart is bound up in? (Sōzei)

¹⁰ Translated by Carter, *Traditional Japanese Poetry*, 318.

¹¹ Text from Shimazu, *Rengashū*, 127-128.

The old Way of Poetry
is still alive today (Gyōjo)¹²

The first verse is about a pet dog who is accustomed to his master and is surprised to see him pull out the stick. The mention of a dog and a stick invites an allusion to the Buddhist image of *bonnō no inu*, the “dog of desire” that never goes away no matter how hard it is beaten. In this Buddhist verse the dog becomes the lingering attachments in the heart of an aging man, who over the years has partially, but not fully, tamed his earthly desires. In the third verse the old man guilty of holding on to earthly passions has become the patriarch of a poetic clan, a loyal and devoted guard of his tradition. In other words, emotional attachments, which are valued negatively in a Buddhist context, suddenly switch to being valued positively.

The following example, from a 1532 sequence by Chōsetsu and Sōboku, pivots from Buddhism to poetry in an even more radical fashion:

仏とて外に有りやと求むらん 聴雪
我がしき島のみやのそのかみ 宗牧
ことのはの風を絶えずも伝へきて 聴雪¹³

hotoke to te / soto ni ari ya to / motomuran (Chōsetsu)
wa ga shikishima no / miya no sono kami (Sōboku)
koto no ha no / kaze o taezu mo / tsuakete (Chōsetsu)

Searching, it seems,
for a Buddha he thinks
is to be found without (Chōsetsu)

Those bygone days of the palace
of our land of Shikishima (Sōboku)

Without a lull, the wind
of the leaves of words
has blown till this day (Chōsetsu)¹⁴

The first verse portrays a devoted religious seeker who nevertheless does not understand that true enlightenment lies within. The palace in the second verse refers to the Shikishima no Kanazashi Palace of Emperor Kinmei, who reigned

¹² Translated by Bonnie McClure.

¹³ Text from Kaneko Kinjirō, ed. *Rengashū, haikaishū*, Vol. 61, *Shinpen Nihon koten bungaku zenshū* (Tokyo: Shōgakusan, 2001), 195.

¹⁴ Translated by Bonnie McClure.

from 509 to 571. It was during Kinmei's reign that Buddhism was officially introduced to Japan; thus, the speaker searching for a Buddha who lies "outside" is now the emperor of old who sought out Buddhist wisdom in far-off countries. Finally, pivoting on the mention of ancient times in the second verse, the third verse sweepingly acclaims the continuity of Japan's poetic tradition—that is, the wisdom to be found right here at home. Although the third verse cannot connect to the first verse, in cases such as this one in which two successive links use a middle verse as a pivot, it seems possible to perceive another level of link that exists for a moment in the space of passing from one pair of verses to the next. Here, in that space an implicit comparison is made between Buddhism and poetry. Which, it seems to ask, is the real way of our ancient land?

One more striking example appears in a 1492 solo *renga* sequence by the master Sōgi, who has often been called the greatest *renga* master of all time.

いたづらの言葉多き筆のあと
つたはりくれば其の法もなし¹⁵

itazura no / koto no ha ōki / fude no ato
tsutawarikureba / sono nori mo nashi

Among these words
so many do not hold true—
vain strokes of the brush.

In transmission it was lost:
the Law is not what it was.¹⁶

The first verse is a love verse. The speaker is looking at old love letters and mourning the changing of passionate emotions over time. In the second verse the words have become those of the Buddha's teachings suffering from corruption in transmission in the days of *mappō* or the end of the Buddhist Dharma. While this link might at first glance appear to be merely connecting two very different topics with clever poetic acrobatics, it can also be seen as a profound comparison of human emotion and religious tradition. In both cases, it

¹⁵ Text from Kaneko Kinjirō, ed., *Sōgi meisaku hyakuin chūshaku* (Tōkyō: Ōfūsha, 1985), 327.

¹⁶ Translated by Steven D. Carter in *The Road to Komatsubara: A Classical Reading of the Renga Hyakuin* (Cambridge, Mass: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1987), 143.

is futile to attempt to conquer the march of time and change with anything so fragile as the written word.

Links involving switches such as this one can serve to draw out new connections between concepts, emotions, or threads of human experience not conventionally associated within previous Japanese tradition, such as parallels between the religious and the romantic experience, or religious and poetic traditions. Examples such as those above showcase the way *renga* at its height became a poetics of drawing new lines that might previously have seemed somewhat taboo. The virtuosity of technique that *renga* required inspired a virtuosity of poetic epistemology. The ephemeral space of meaning created between each pair of verses was a space in which poets could advance fresh, even perhaps shocking, insights, couched as a display of poetic skill.

Through this juxtaposition of Buddhist sentiments with verses on other topics, *renga* relativizes and destabilizes any absolute meaning that might seem to be inherent in a given Buddhist statement. But the very method of destabilization is itself grounded in a Buddhist-oriented poetics of nothingness and impermanence. As mentioned earlier, this destabilization occurred at a crucial time in the history of the dance between Buddhism and poetry. The viability of a productive coexistence between the two had begun to move towards gaining general acceptance starting in the early medieval period with Saigyō and Fujiwara no Shunzei's experiments in merging Buddhism with poetry. However, the rise of *renga* provided an opportunity for the most successful synthesis yet due to the way its very form lent itself to being viewed within a Buddhist frame. *Renga* is a portrait of a reality in which all things are in constant flux, with meaning arising dependently based on the conditions of the sequence's flow. Buddhist sentiments, just like all others, are deconstructed and washed away, turning into something else as they are reinterpreted in the next verse, and forgotten by the time a third verse comes along.

This process is in the larger picture one of the presence of a more conventional, topic-oriented Buddhist presence in poetry beginning to give way to an application of Buddhism that is more suited to an intimate engagement with the process of poetic creation. This engagement would be a highly successful one that would see poetry becoming deeply intertwined with Zen in particular in the centuries to come. Buddhism had thus found a way of imprinting itself upon the Japanese poetic tradition that would effectively preserve its influence on that tradition far into the future.

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