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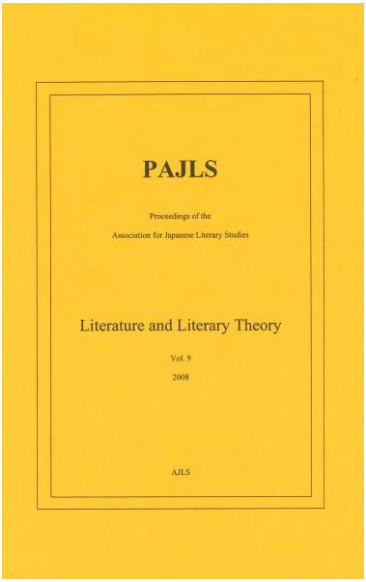

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Cognitive Theories of Embodiment and Metaphor in Japanese Buddhist Poetry (*Shakkyō-ka*): An Exploratory Essay

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Introduction

In *The Karma of Words,* William LaFleur makes a case for the Buddhist critique of symbols, in poetry in particular, as it was conceived through *hongaku*, or original enlightenment, thought. The ramifications of this critique for the literati, he says, is that symbols no longer represented just that to which they pointed. As LaFleur puts it, "The poetry that results from and expresses this aesthetic invites us to see things in and for themselves; it deliberately rejects the attempt to discover 'meanings,' implications hidden or coded into a poem."[1] Later, LaFleur goes on to show how Fujiwara Shunzei used this critique in conjunction with Chih-i's *Mo-ho chih-kuan*, among other things, to provide a rationale for the claim that "the composition and collection of secular verse *must be a Buddhist activity* . . ."[2]

Recent research in cognitive and neuroscience as well as Western philosophy and psychology supports LaFleur's argument and provides us with a clearer picture of how—with Buddhist thought, rituals, and ceremonies as the backdrop—the concern with symbols might have been dealt with in Heian Japan in the first place. By studying some conclusions of this research and comparing them with the Buddhist teachings of no-self, we can begin to see how Western approaches to understanding the mind may have finally caught up to and verified at least some of these Buddhist teachings. The aim of this paper is to explore how the poetic symbol in medieval Japanese poetry, the Buddhist teachings of no-self, and cognitive research on the brain might be brought together in examining the role of the composition and categorization of the sub-genre of *waka* known as *shakkyō-ka* (poems on the teachings of the Buddha) in the mid-Heian period.

The Science

The interdisciplinary field of cognitive science has been around for almost a half century, but it is only within the last twenty years that it has turned in a direction that has made it more attractive to philosophers and linguists, as well as to religion and literary scholars. One of the principal books that propelled this turn was *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* by scientist and Buddhist practitioner Francisco Varela, philosopher Evan Thompson, and psychologist and Buddhist practitioner Eleanor Rosch. In a rare attempt to link the sciences and other academic fields—to produce *consilience* to use Edward O. Wilson's term—the authors "propose to build a bridge between mind in science and mind in experience by

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[1] William LaFleur, *Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), 24.
[2] LaFleur, *Karma of Words*, 91.

articulating a dialogue between these two traditions of Western cognitive science and Buddhist meditative psychology."[3] They seek to provide an alternative approach to the hypothesis of "cognitivism" that "the mind is thought to operate by manipulating symbols that represent features of the world or represent the world as being a certain way."[4] Their approach diverges in two important ways from past research in the cognitive sciences by providing what they call "(1) a critique of symbol processing" as well as "(2) a critique of the adequacy of the notion of representation . . ."[5] To the first critique they apply the word *emergence* (also known as connectionism), because they claim that cognitive tasks *emerge from* "systems made up of many simple components, which, when connected by the appropriate rules, give rise to global behavior corresponding to the desired task."[6] In other words, we do not carry out cognitive tasks by responding to phenomena in the world with mental interpretations of the properties of those phenomena. Instead, we carry out cognitive tasks according to a systemic (brain + body) understanding of how our world works. To the second critique—the "critique of the adequacy of the notion of representation"—they apply the word *enactive* to emphasize the "growing conviction" (within the cognitive scientific community) that "cognition is not the representation of a pre-given world by a pre-given mind but rather the *enactment* of a world and a mind on the basis of a history of the variety of actions that a being in the world performs."[7] By acknowledging that we enact the world with our whole bodies including our brains rather than represent the world with calculations performed in the brain alone, we can begin to understand the necessity for recognizing the functions of the body (our senses, for example) as completely interconnected with our brain, to form, some would say, our mind. It should be obvious that what these three authors are providing is a scientific elaboration of LaFleur's position that Japanese medieval poetry is best appreciated by engaging in the offer to see things "in and for themselves" (to recall—either through memory or imagination—the experience of those things) rather than through the lens of computation in which we look for ways to understand symbols through ideas about those symbols—what those symbols point to, in other words.

One of the most important conclusions of this recent research is that "the self or cognizing subject is fundamentally fragmented or nonunified"—another way of expressing the Buddhist idea of egolessness.[8] If *The Embodied Mind* were the only book to arise out of Western science and to make such a statement, we might be able to dismiss it, but the concept occurs fairly frequently throughout the literature. To give just one example: in a textbook published in 1999 entitled *The Biology of Mind: Origins and Structures of Mind, Brain, and Consciousness* by M. Deric Bownds, the author says, ". . . it is interesting that what modern psychology and cognitive neuroscience say about how the mind works can be taken as a restatement, in modern form, of what Buddhist psychology has been saying about the nature of cognition for the past 1500 years. . . . Meditation techniques best described as 'mindfulness' or 'awareness' are used

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[3] Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: The MIT Press, 1993), xviii.
[4] Varela, et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 8.
[5] Varela, et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 8
[6] Varela, et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 8
[7] Varela, et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 9.
[8] Varela, et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 48.

to sense the transitory, shifting nature of all phenomena and the various guises of the ego self, 'I,' that we take to be who we are."[9]

Scholars in other fields are reaching similar conclusions. In a book entitled *The Meaning of the Body* published in 2007, the philosopher Mark Johnson, using Dewey and James *as well as* cognitive science makes a case for non-dualistic "embodied meaning" in such a way that, while his argument is not dependent upon Buddhism, certainly has the resonance of it: ". . . how does meaning emerge from a continuous process of organism-environment interactions, bottom-up, if it can't issue top-down from some alleged pure ego? The answer to this . . . is that our experience is based, first, on our sensorimotor experience, our feelings, and our visceral connections to our world; and second, on various imaginative capacities for using sensorimotor processes to understand abstract concepts."[10] Johnson's rejection of the "pure ego" mirrors conclusions reached in *The Embodied Mind.*

Cognitive linguists such as George Lakoff have applied the same ideas of embodied meaning—how we use "sensorimotor processes to understand abstract concepts"—to metaphor and categorization, a linguistic critique of symbols, if you will. In *Metaphors We Live By*, written with Mark Johnson, the authors make the claim that metaphor is not a special use of language reserved for literary flourish, but is "pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."[11] Our corporeal understanding of the world is manifested linguistically as metaphor in so far as we use such expressions to re-enact in words what we already know with our bodies.

What links all of this theoretical work is the conceptual emphasis on bodily experience and awareness. The usage of the word "experience" is not just shorthand for "subjectivity." "Subjectivity," Lakoff claims, is nothing more than an oppositional view to "objectivity" and has no more claim to truth than anything else. Lakoff's definition of "experience" comes from a non-dualistic point of view and claims that

> understanding emerges from interaction, from constant negotiation with the environment and other people. It emerges in the following way: the nature of our bodies and our physical and cultural environment imposes a structure on our experience, in terms of natural dimensions. . . . Recurrent experience leads to the formation of categories, which are experiential gestalts with those natural dimensions. Such gestalts define coherence in our experience. We understand our experience directly when we see it as being structured coherently in terms of gestalts that have emerged directly from interaction with and in our environment. We understand experience metaphorically when we use a gestalt from one domain of experience to structure experience in another domain.[12]

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[9] M. Deric Bownds, *The Biology of Mind: Origins and Structures of Mind, Brain, and Consciousness* (Bethesda: Fitzgerald Science Press, 1999), 307. In this quote the author has shaved (hopefully accidentally) 1000 years off Buddhist history. It should read 2500 years rather than 1500.

[10] Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 12.

[11] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3.

[12] Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 230.

In other words, we understand, for example, the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY from our actual experience of what a journey is and our actual experience of what a life is. The "mapping" (to use a cognitive linguistic term) that occurs between the two domains of "life" and "journey" allows us to integrate the two ("the person leading a life is a traveler; her purposes are destinations; the means for achieving purposes are routes" etc.)[13] This perspective has been significantly expanded in a more recent book from 2002 entitled *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, but what's important here is that our use of metaphor is grounded in our bodily experience and in the mind's awareness of the world.

Varela, Thompson, and Rosch also allude to the bodily-based orientation of metaphor. They say, "Theories and models no longer begin with abstract symbolic descriptions but with a whole army of neurallike, simple, unintelligent components, which, when properly connected, have interesting global properties."[14] Our minds are not, in other words, computers that make and spit out symbolic representations of the real world. Instead, the mind might be compared to a "cooperative system: the dense interconnections among its components entail that eventually everything going on will be a function of what all the components are doing."[15] This constantly emerging system of simultaneous interconnections is similar in Buddhist thought to the constantly arising and disappearing *skandhas* (also known as aggregates)—form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness—that are the defining characteristics of a body-mind in *samsāra*. In the same way that we mistakenly view the *skandhas* as comprising a unified self, it is also possible to misperceive the interconnections of the "cooperative system" about which Varela, Thompson, and Rosch speak as a unified self. And in fact, most of us make this mistake most of the time. Our samsaric interpretations of the *skandhas* (or our misperception of the interconnections of the "cooperative system") lead us to falsely recognize a continuous self. It is only through the discipline of meditation—aided in the future hopefully by further experiments on the processes of cognition—that we can come to recognize the transitory nature of these *skandhas*/interconnections.

To return to poetry and symbols again: metaphor—and a host of other symbolic forms of language like simile and metonymy—is increasingly seen as the linguistic manifestation of the interactions of our selfless body-minds and our environment. Let's consider the domain of VERTICALITY for a moment: we understand that the "downside" of a plan is not as good as the "upside" of a plan from our interactions with verticality. From the moment we were first able to upright (another metaphorical term) ourselves as children, we knew that "becoming vertical" was good and that "not being able to become vertical" was, if not bad, then at least an obstruction to carrying out other tasks. So what might this say about the nature of those metaphors? Are they representations of the world they supposedly symbolize or are they, instead, verbal mappings of the experience we're having? If metaphors are representations in the classical sense, then they are mental manipulations performed by a brain that has no need for the body in which it is encased. If they are verbal mappings of our experience—and by "experience" here I mean all five *skandhas* (form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness)—then metaphors are interconnected to our bodies through our brains in conjunction with our environment and, therefore, represent the experience of a thing rather than the properties of that

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[13] George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 3.
[14] Varela, et al., *The Embodied Mind,* 87.
[15] Varela, et al., *The Embodied Mind*, 94.

thing. If the moon, for example—to cite one very common image in Buddhist poetry—shares properties with enlightenment, then it is our experience of that moon (its brightness, its color, its shape), rather than the way we describe the moon in language (bright, white, full), that we map onto what we know of enlightenment. Our bodily experience of brightness, whiteness, and fullness makes the moon a viable candidate for a metaphor of enlightenment because of how we experience the moon.

All of this information about the non-unified self, our body-based experience of that non-unified self through the practice of meditative discipline, and the body-derived origin of metaphor substantiates LaFleur's claim that the poetry of medieval Japan invites us to "see things in and for themselves." If, for example, we were to re-examine Ki no Tsurayuki's Preface to the *Kokinshū* in terms of the five *skandhas*, we might read it this way: "The seeds ["form": *skandha* one—i.e. that which incites] of Japanese poetry lie in the human heart ["feelings": *skandha* two] and grow into leaves of ten thousand words [extrapolating from this: metaphors and *skandha* five "consciousness"]. Many things happen to the people of this world [experience], and all that they think ["mental formations" *and/or* "consciousness": *skandhas* four and five] and feel ["feelings": *skandha* two] is given in description of things they see and hear [our bodily senses]."[16] Reinterpreted this way, the Preface takes on new significance and makes it easier to understand how—through the lens of Buddhism—poetry was seen first as a vehicle for pointing to experience and then later became the vehicle—the soteriological vehicle—of that experience.

With this re-reading of the opening to Ki no Tsurayuki's Preface in mind, I will briefly look at some examples of *shakkyō-ka* from the 11th and 12th centuries—from a time that precedes the seventh imperial poetry anthology, the *Senzaishū,* in which Buddhist poems were collected for the first time into a separate book by its compiler, Fujiwara Shunzei. You will recall that it was Shunzei who, in a poetic treatise, claimed that the writing of secular poetry was itself a Buddhist activity. The questions I'd like to pose are: how did poems on Buddhist themes rescue phenomena which had long been used as poetic symbols from signifying didactically *only* the matters to which they symbolically pointed? How did Heian Buddhist poetics restore an emphasis in which concrete phenomena are allowed to be perceived as *themselves*, while simultaneously suggesting other symbolic possibilities, and in the process transform the act of poetic creation into a Buddhist path (*michi*)?

The Poems

The poems that follow give a taste of the 11th and 12th century experience of Buddhism as it was expressed in *waka.*[17] They each include or allude to a symbol of some kind. Also common to all, however, is the world of the imperial court in which the writing of poetry was inseparable from social life and the world of Buddhist culture in which the pursuit of poetic composition was at first considered potentially detrimental to enlightenment.

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[16] Extrapolated from Laurel Rasplica Rodd with Mary Catherine Henkenius, *Kokinshū: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (Boston: Cheng & Tsui, 1996), 35. My revised text without the insertions in the original translation is: "The forms of Japanese poetry lie in our feelings and grow into metaphors. Many things are experienced by the people of this world, and all that they are conscious of and feel is given in description of things they sense through their eyes and ears."

[17] The following poems were translated collaboratively with the poet Patrick Donnelly, using the *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei* texts of the imperial anthologies. To supplement these texts, I have also made reference to Ishihara Kiyoshi, *Shakkyō-ka no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Dōhōsha, 1980).

A poem by Fujiwara Kintō expresses the speaker's hesitation about taking the tonsure, a decision that involved a drastic and painful separation from the benefits of court society. The speaker expresses this predicament in terms of a conscious conflict about whether to remain metaphorically asleep, or to commit to religious awakening:

SENT TO THE MAJOR CONTROLLER OF THE LEFT YUKINARI WHEN NARINOBU AND SHIGEIE TOOK THE TONSURE

omohi shiru / hito mo arikeru / yo no naka o / itsu o itsu tote / sugusuran

shall I
while away this world
thinking "when oh when?"—

when there are people
already long since
awake?

-- Right Commander of the Guards Kintō

Shūishū 1335

Kintō's poem is a quintessential expression of the quandary facing many court men and women at this time, but the specific incident to which Kintō refers occurred on the fourth day of the second month of 1001. On that day, two young courtiers, Minamoto no Narinobu (b. 979) and Fujiwara no Shigeie (dates unknown), decided that rather than pursue their promising careers at court, they would instead take the tonsure at Miidera. If these two men had not been, respectively, the adopted son of Fujiwara no Michinaga (966-1027), the Minister of the Left, and the only natural son of Fujiwara no Akimitsu (944-1021), the Minister of the Right, the impact might have been less dramatic, but considering their youth, their backgrounds, their potential for rank and power, and the benefits that inevitably accrued to such status, it is not surprising that their elders and the people of the court in general were perplexed by such an act.[18] Kintō's words do not express complete perplexity, however. The rhetorical nature of his inquiry signaled by the words *itsu o itsu tote* makes it clear that Kintō knows the answer to his own question.

The compiler of the *Shūishū* balanced Kintō's poem with an earlier poem in the sequence (*Shūishū* 1330) in which the speaker expresses only slightly more determination about taking the tonsure. But ambivalence is still implicit in his use of the conditional "if" and "it ought to be today":

WRITTEN AND LEFT AT HOME WHEN HE DEPARTED TO BECOME A PRIEST

ukiyo o ba / somukaba kefu mo / somukinan / asu mo ari to wa / tanomu beki mi ka.

[18] There are various records of this event in works such as *Nihon kiryaku* and *Kojidan*, but the version found in Fujiwara no Yukinari's *kambun* diary, *Gonki*, is regarded as the most reliable. See Komachiya Teruhiko, *Fujiwara Kintō: yōjōbi o utau*, vol. 7 of series *Ōchō no kajin* (Tokyo: Shūeisha, 1985), 172-175.

if I'm going to turn my back
on this terrible world

it ought to be today—

can this body count
on any tomorrow?

-- *Yoshishige Yasutane*

Shūishū 1330

The rhetorical question in the last two lines (like the rhetorical question in Kintō's poem previously) makes it clear that the speaker of the poem understands the implications of *not* taking the tonsure, but there is no hint that in fact he will take such a step. What Yoshishige seems to be saying is that procrastination—especially when it comes to renouncing *ukiyo*, "this terrible world"—is the same thing as toying with one's fate as a Buddhist: if tomorrow should never come, any chance to change one's karma would also be lost.

In *Shūishū* 1342, the path the speaker refers to could mean the lower realms of hell, hungry ghosts, and animals in the Buddhist cosmology, or human confusion or neuroses (*samsāra*) that prevent enlightenment. The headnote to the poem says it was sent to the Holy Priest Shōkū (917-1007) of Mt. Shosha. The moon on the mountain in the poem could refer to the Western Paradise of Amida (because the moon sets in the west), Buddhist enlightenment, and/or the monk, the author's teacher, in his mountaintop temple. In this way, the poem expresses a spiritual predicament—suffering and hope for release from suffering—in the sensually specific terms of an almost desperate request for light to shine upon the speaker's darkness. Long thought to have been composed at the time of her death, Shikibu's poem is now more commonly regarded as one that may have been written much earlier.[19]

kuraki yori / kuraki michi ni zo / irinu beki / haruka ni terase / yama no ha no tsuki

the path I had to take
led from dark
to darker—

o moon

on your mountain edge
shine across
the vast emptiness

--*Masamune no Onna Shikibu* [Izumi Shikibu]

Shūishū 1342

The thematic focus of this poem is on the first two lines (*kuraki yori/kuraki michi ni zo*) which are borrowed from the Parable of the Conjured City in Chapter Seven of the Lotus Sutra: "Throughout the long night of time they gain in evil destinies/And reduce the ranks of the

[19] The reason for this shift is due to the attribution Masamune no Onna Shikibu which links the author more closely to her father since Masamune was his given name and would imply that the author was not or had not yet been married.

gods./From darkness proceeding to darkness/They never hear the Buddha's name."[20] This parable is nothing less than an evocation of the path to enlightenment as expressed through the skillful means of the Buddha. The city that is conjured in the story by the Buddha is an illusion of temporary comfort in the same way that Shikibu's path *to* enlightenment— to her moon—will merely guide her there; it is not to be mistaken for enlightenment itself. The fact that her teacher, Shōkū Shōnin, and the moon are in the distance (*haruka ni*) reinforces the journey motif.

Throughout the 11th c., we find pairs of Buddhist poems (called *zōtōka*, or exchange poems) that are grounded in the usual poetic "repartee" of the court, demonstrating that Buddhism was in the process of becoming fully integrated into the contemporary social fabric. In the following two poems, at first glance the moon does not seem to represent enlightenment until the headnote is added: "A poem sent to Ise no Tayū in the middle of the night on the fifteenth day of the second month."

ikanareba / koyoi no tsuki no / sayonaka ni / terashi mo hatede / irishinaruran

why
instead of shining
to the end

did the moon of evening
go inside the veil
during the night's small hours?

--Priest Keihan

Goshūishū 1181

This poem and the one that follows allude to the Buddhist tradition that the Buddha's *parinirvāna* (passage into final nirvana) took place on a full-moon night on his eightieth birthday. Many Buddhists commemorate the event on the day of the full moon in the second month, which fell on the fifteenth day.

The following *waka* is Ise no Tayū's reply:

yo o terasu / tsuki kakurenishi / sayonaka wa / aware yami ni ya / mina madoiken

during the night's small hours
the moon
that shone over the world

has hidden—will everyone
have been lost
in the dark?

--Ise no Tayū

Goshūishū 1182

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[20] Leon Hurvitz trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 133; *Hokke-kyō*, vol. 3, edited and translated by Sakamoto Yukio and Iwamoto Yutaka (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1967), 292.

In this poem, the author refers back to Keihan's "moon," but she deflects Keihan's compliment and insists that it is not she who is hidden, but the Buddha due to his death. On the other hand, there is also an alternative reading to this poem that could suggest some coquettishness on the author's part. The final question in the last two and a half lines ("will everyone/have been lost/in the dark?"), while clearly referring to "everyone" (*mina*), could also be a euphemistic way of asking that perhaps Keihan is lost without her.

Waka on the practice of meditative techniques—especially Shingon-derived techniques—are not numerous among the *shakkyō-ka* in the imperial anthologies, but the following poem by Bishop Kakuchō (952-1035), a disciple of Genshin (942-1017), refers to a practice called *gachirinkan*, or "contemplation of the moon disk":

ON CONTEMPLATION OF THE MOON DISC

tsuki no wa ni / kokoro o kakeshi / yūbe yori / yorozu no koto o / yume to miru kana

since the evening
I surrendered my heart

to the circle of the moon
the myriad things
I see as a dream

-- *Bishop Kakuchō*

Goshūishū 1188

Kakuchō's poem is a good example of how the symbol *of* enlightenment ("the moon") upon sufficient contemplation becomes the vehicle *for* realization ("the myriad things/I see as a dream"). In his work *Hizō Hōyaku*, Kūkai explains why this is valuable for the practitioner:

> The Buddhas of great compassion . . . with the wisdom of skillful means, taught them this profound Esoteric Buddhist yoga and made each devotee visualize in his inner mind the bright moon. . . . It [his original Mind] is just like the full moon, spotless and bright. Why? Because all sentient beings are endowed with the all-pervading Mind. We are to perceive our own Mind in the form of the moon. The reason the image of the moon is used is that the body of the bright moon is analogous to that of the enlightened Mind. . . .[21]

The fact that this experience was then composed into a *waka* reveals the way in which poetic composition came to be regarded as fundamentally inseparable from the experience itself. If the words of the Buddha as found in sutras and commentaries could form the basis for a court poem as we see in so many of the Lotus Sutra poems, so too could the experience gleaned from meditation itself.

Goshūishū 1189, by Fujiwara Kintō (which uses the phrase "leaves of grass"— *kusa no ha*—a thousand years before Walt Whitman did) explores a moment in which the speaker

[21] Yoshito S. Hakeda, *Kūkai: Major Works* (New York: Columbia University, 1972), 218-219.

integrates "book learning" of the Buddhist teachings (in this case the Yuima-kyō or Vimalakîrti Sūtra) with personal experience. The result of this integration, which we as readers watch as it takes place on the "stage" of the poem, is a flood of emotion for the speaker. Though this emotion is expressed in the conventional poetic epithet of the time—sleeves were copiously wet with tears throughout the Heian period—it is striking to see this epithet, often employed in relation to romantic subjects or general regret about impermanence, used in relation to a specifically religious emotion.

ON THE METAPHOR FROM THE YUIMA-KYO WHICH SAYS "THIS BODY IS LIKE A BANANA TREE"

kaze fukeba / mazu yaburenuru / kusa no ha ni / yosōru kara ni / sode zo tsuyukeki

leaves of grass
that break at the first gust—

no sooner do I make
that likening

than my sleeves
are wet with tears

-- Former Major Counsellor Kintō

Goshūishū 1189

The final poem begins by considering an aspect of the Buddhist teaching on death and rebirth, but concludes with a lyric focus on the emotions that naturally arise from these thoughts of evanescence and mortality. Like many other such poems that allude to specific scripture passages (*Goshūishū* 1189, for instance), *Kin'yōshū* 633/674 puts the very act of making metaphors ("likened") in the foreground of what the poem asks the reader to consider.

ON THE PASSAGE "WHEN MY LIFE IS ABOUT TO END, I MAKE THIS WISH," FROM SAMANTABHADRA'S TEN VOWS

inochi o mo / tsumi o mo tsuyu ni / tatoekeri / kieba tomo ni ya / kien to suran

he likened both this life
and the sin
it carries

to a dew

that perishes—

might those disappearances
be close
at hand?

-- Kakuju Hōshi

Kin'yōshū 633/674

In Lieu of a Conclusion

The observation that prompted this paper occurred after reading about recent discoveries in the burgeoning field of cognitive science. It appears that research into our brain activity is uncovering a scientific truth about human existence that Buddhist philosophers, teachers, and texts have claimed for centuries. That truth is that despite how we perceive ourselves on a daily basis, there is no unified being that we all call "me." We are instead the effect of our habitual responses to our environment. The sources of those responses are the sensations we are always experiencing in our world. We respond in certain ways to the world because we have habituated ourselves to those responses. We have not evolved into a self as we grow up; we have created a self from our habits.

The significance of this knowledge for our interpretation of Japanese Buddhist poetry could, I feel, be substantial. When we read the symbols of Japanese Buddhist poetry, we acknowledge that those symbols stand for something other than the obvious meaning of the words. At the same time, we also need to recognize and understand what LaFleur has called the "Buddhist critique" of those symbols. In *The Karma of Words*, LaFleur claims that the foundation for that critique lies in the Buddhist idea of *hongaku*, "original enlightenment." *Hongaku*, the belief that the enlightened mind is not something to be achieved but something to be realized since it already exists within us, expresses the Buddhist teaching on non-duality during the Heian period. If a symbol can refer to something other than itself, with proper meditative reflection and poetic training, he says, the poet can collapse that extra-linguistic meaning back onto itself in a "simple recognition of phenomena."[22] What prompts that turn is what he calls a "renewed simplicity" on the part of the poet that "*redirects* our focused attention to phenomena for their own sake."[23]

The connection between the egolessness claimed by cognitive science and Buddhism and the collapse of poetic symbols in Japanese Buddhist poetry lies in the radical non-duality of both. The egolessness that accompanies Buddhist enlightenment is catalyzed and supported by meditative techniques that involve the training of both the body and the mind. This training and the awareness that it engenders increases our sensitivity to the world at the same time that it decreases our habitual responses to it. With this increased sensitivity the properly trained poet can invoke the world through his/her poetry non-dualistically.

Part of the "discussion" that took place during the second half of the Heian period about poetry and its symbols occurred when the poets of the imperial court began writing *waka* on Buddhist themes in the late tenth century. By consciously associating the Buddhist teachings with the writing of court poetry both in terms of the theme of the poems and in terms of the formation of sequences of *shakkyō-ka* in the imperial poetry anthologies, poets were "discussing" the viability of poetic composition becoming a path (*michi*) co-equal to the path of the Buddhist teachings. The advantage of reaching this understanding of Buddhist poetry and the role it played in Heian Japan now, in the early twenty-first century, is that we also have recent advances in cognitive scientific research to support our methodical and scientific exploration of the process by which symbols became an essential part of that path.

[22] LaFleur, *Karma of Words*, 23.
[23] LaFleur, *Karma of Words*, 23.