

Poetry, Zen and Transcultural Aesthetics

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What do the three concepts, Poetry, Zen and Transcultural Aesthetics, have in common, or what sense is there to join them together as a theme? Poetry is universal human creative art, Zen is a Japanese philosophic concept and transcultural aesthetics is a field of study exploring aesthetic expressions transcending and crossing cultural borders. This essay endeavours to show the connectedness of the worlds behind these three concepts and presents examples to support the arguments.

1. Poetry Over Time

It was an ancient mother in Finland who expressed her anxious emotional worries about the future fate of her little daughter with these poetic verses:

<i>Mihin tuutinen tytärtä? Tuutitan tätä tytärtä, tätä lasta liekuttelen, souan pienisormistani, vakaistani vaapottelen. Vaan en tieä, vaimo raukka, tunne en, kantaja katala, mihin tuutinen tytärtä, kuhun lasta liekuttelen, minkä karjun kainalohon, kunka rehvakan rekehen...</i>	<i>Whither is my daughter taken? Lulling my little daughter, Lulling her in her cradle, swinging my sweetie one, rocking my tiny baby. Yet not knowing, poor woman, not sensing, weak mother, whither is my daughter taken, after lulling in her cradle, what will the man be like, what will his nature be...</i>
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(continues with 26 more lines of lamentation, fears and premonition for a bad marriage)¹

The poem is from *Kanteletar*, the Finnish lyric folk epic (continuation to *Kalevala*, the Finnish ‘heroes’ folk epic). This poem represents well in its vivid and rich language the kind of poetry which the Finnish ancestors in villages created to express the passions and dreams of their hearts and souls. The epic contains 652 poems with 22,239 verses, all collected by Elias Lönnrot during his visits as doctor to Finnish country side in the 1830’s and 40’s. Poems were orally passed from generation to generation. They were sung with a great variety of themes, including traditional historical legends, myths, women’s and girls’ songs, men’s and boys’ songs, ballads, lovers’ songs, heroes’ adventures, religious prayers and lamentations, etc.

The traditional poetic 8-syllable rhythm of Finnish folk poems, their singing voicing and extraordinary colourful wordings with alliterations cannot be transmitted into the translation into English, only the basic contents.

On the other side of the world, about 1300 years ago the nobleman Kaki-no-Moto expressed his longing in this poem:

<i>Ashibiki no</i>	<i>Long is the mountain pheasant’s tail</i>
<i>Yamadori no o no</i>	<i>That curves down in its flight</i>
<i>Shidario no</i>	<i>But longer still, it seems to me</i>
<i>Naga-nagashi yo wo</i>	<i>Left in my lonely plight</i>
<i>Hitori ka mo nemu.</i>	<i>Is this unending night.²</i>

This poem is from *Hyaku-nin-isshu, A Hundred Verses from Old Japan*, the well known anthology of Japanese classical poetry, collected in the 13th century by Sadaiye Fujiwara and comprising mainly love poems written by high ranking people during several previous centuries. All the poems have the same traditional form, called *tanka*, in which the poetic rhythm is set in 31 syllables in five lines, arranged with 5-7-5-7-7 syllables.

Where the Finnish tradition invites the poet to express feelings and life settings with manifold and diversified wordings and rhythmic elaborations, the Japanese tradition seeks to find a concise, evocative and refined expression with symbols from nature to express emotions within a set frame, which, however, is open to intangible space.

Modern poetry everywhere has abandoned strict rules and rhymes of earlier times, except one, the Japanese *haiku*. It is still shorter and more concise than *tanka*, having only 17 syllables in three lines, arranged with 5-7-5 syllables. One of the most famous haiku masters was Basho (1644-1694), whose poems are well read and celebrated still today, and whose inspiration to create haiku has continued and spread all over the world. Haiku fascinates both poets and appreciators of poetry. Let's quote a few for our study. First a well known haiku by Basho:

<i>Sabishisa ya</i>	<i>Loneliness—</i>
<i>Iwa ni shimikomu</i>	<i>Sinking into the rocks</i>
<i>Semi no koe</i>	<i>A cicada's cry³</i>

Then the haiku by the winner of the first prize, Inga Uhlemann (Japan), in the 3rd Mainichi Haiku Contest in Tokyo in 1999:

Winter sea
Great waves toss ashore
The fragmented moon⁴

The third one is written recently by myself:

Far white mountains
Plum trees in fullest blooming
Mist of falling flakes

Each of these three haiku opens a scene into nature in different seasons: summer, winter and spring. But the poet is not only a beholder of the view described, he becomes part of it, merges with it with his inner feelings, he let the reader expand the scene into mysteries of the universe with his imagination. The spiritual resonance and attractiveness emanating from haiku may be explained by saying that it has Zen nature.

2. Zen

Briefly, the Japanese concept of Zen (based on Chinese Ch'an and Sanskrit Dhyana) means originally in Buddhist context meditation,

which leads to enlightenment (*satori*), to deep comprehension of the original nature and essence of things in life and cosmos. A contemporary Zen Master, Taisen Deshimaru, living in France, has presented in his book *La Pratique du Zen*, the Sacred Zen text, called *San Do Kai*, which was originally written by Zen Master Sekito Kisen (700-790) after his long *za-zen* meditations on a stone. *San* here means all phenomena, individual and different things, all existences in time and space, duality. *Do* means the notion of origin, the inner essence of all things and the original void, non-duality. *Kai* means in a large sense a new mixture, fusion and interpenetration of *San* and *Do*, a new insight of connectedness and unity, which leads to new creative thoughts.⁵ Great haiku poets were also Zen masters, and it is the very heart of *San Do Kai*, which is expressed in haiku: a perceived phenomenon or an object, a sentiment or sight, then an extension beyond it into another dimension, and finally a new insight, a unifying harmonious fusion, a new creative enhancement transcending the mere ordinary. This could be considered an essential process in all meaningful art.

Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945) based his philosophic thinking on Zen, and in his profound and often poetic writings he emphasized the search for truth in artistic creation and meditation. He has expressed the foundation for the creation and experience of art in two lines:

‘Seeing the form in the formless — Hearing the sound in the soundless’.

And further in his own poem, called

Zen circle
The moon of the mind
Is singularly round
*Its light swallows up all things*⁶

It is the essence in a new image that is expressed and shared with others.

Poetry is universal, search for essential origin as well, and it is the creative mind that brings about new aesthetic compositions and

insights into the mysterious void. In all parts of the world cultures and human beings express their souls in poetics. Victor Hugo, the French writer and poet (1802-1885) exclaimed when asked about the meaning of poetry: *La poésie, l'essence même de la vie...* (Poetry, the very essence of life...). It may seem that in today's world we consider other matters more essential in life than poetry, but we should never let poetry disappear from the depth of our souls. In my book *A Lacquered Box* (A box of poems) I have imagined in a dream, when sitting in the temple of Shisendo in Kyoto (Hall of Poetry Immortals, built by Ishikawa Jozan in 1641, now a Zen temple) that I am having discussion with the ancient Chinese and Japanese poets, whose pictures are hanging on the walls of the temple. A short extract from the book may be quoted here:

'You comprehend that Zen and the Way of poetry are inseparable?' I heard the Chinese saying.

'If you do not understand the essence of poetry, you do not understand Zen either, they both search for truth by means of grasping the spirit,' he went on.

'Yes, and the search is eternal, changing in appearance constantly, different in birth, in burst of life, in growing, in blooming, in fading, in death and in vanishing in ten thousand forms in nature,' Jozan added with a serious expression on his face.

One of the lady poets got up, and I felt as if I had shouted together with her through her mouth.

'NEVER KILL A POET!!!'

That flamed up voices of acclaim, shouts of praise and bustling discourse.

'How true, how true'... the Chinese yelled.

'Yes, absolutely, it can't be done, it can't truly be done... killing a poet is never succeeding', the other continued.

...

'Poets are wise fools, they can laugh at trivial things, they can twist anything ugly into a pretty funny joke, they turn senseless seriousness into clever humour or agony into beauty, they make

these scrolls of paper live! Now look at my poems, how they fill the air with the force and might of spirit,' the Chinese shouted, swung his brush and made vigorous spontaneous curling and hurling of lines on paper, explaining,

'This is the mild wind from the mountains touching the turtle stone in the garden.'

'No, one can never kill a poet, he has the secret of life in his heart, he knows without knowing and sees without seeing, he creates things from nothing, he makes the white circle which he paints on paper shine as the full moon, when others reduce the full moon to mere lifeless non-coloured spot. Tu Fu lived as a man 1200 years ago, but through his poems he lives today and lives for ever, you never kill a poet.'...?

This is a eulogy to poetry, it is through poetry that humans can feel human without constraints of time or place or culture. When we understand the profound wisdom expressed in the subtle and natural Zen concept of *San Do Kai*, and in the poetry created on that basis, we find the tranquillity and beauty we need for our well-being.

3. *Transcultural Aesthetics*

In intercultural discussions on aesthetics the term of comparative aesthetics has been used with the aim that through comparative research better understanding (and deepened appreciation) of artworks and cultural traditions of other cultures would be achieved. But problems have been faced in regard to definitions, criteria and to methodological settings. Transcultural aesthetics is a new term, which is much more open and not involved with fixed and one-sided criteria but which gives space to varied and diversified value bases. Personally I see the transcultural approach the most comprehensive and profound approach to both the field of aesthetics and to human cultural and spiritual advancement in more general context. The approach of transcultural aesthetics could briefly be described as a process through the following three main levels which I like to connect with the Zen wisdom of *San Do Kai*:

a) First, when undertaking research or studying cultural phenomena and art forms of other cultures, the concepts, criteria and value judgements have to be seen and made from within the very bases of the cultures concerned (not from the cultural basis of the researcher) and appreciating and respecting the arts have to be realised within the frame of reference of the cultures under study. This requires entering another scene and encountering another society with an endeavour for acquiring deep understanding of traditions, values, conceptual canons and symbolic meanings in artistic creations, as well as of different philosophies of life and world views of other peoples. This is truly seeing *San* in the world.

b) Then, one should seek to transcend the outward diversified richness of expressions and to reach for basic essential values and concepts in art and life, which would be common to all humanity, expressed in great art works and ultimate philosophies themselves. This requires deep sensitivity to inner universal human feelings and to wordless transfer of knowing and to the awareness of a spiritual unity above cultural borders. The result would be, as far as possible, a common transcultural aesthetic language for the humankind, the original spiritual void of *Do*.

c) Thirdly the aim should be enhancing creative potentialities and activities of human beings in all cultures through intermingling of artistic influences. The process should enable new modes of art and aesthetic expressions to emerge, not by imposing or copying values or forms from one culture to the other, but by renovating the precious roots and values of each culture by fresh showers and spirit of beauty elevated jointly and internationally. This is *Kai*. When teaching about *San Do Kai*, Taisen Deshimaru concluded that the key to a future human civilisation is found in the true comprehension of *San Do Kai*.

Thus in one direction transcultural aesthetics means to comprehend as fully as possible the roots of cultural identities and expressions. In the other direction it means to rise as high above the tops of the trees of cultural varieties in order to comprehend the common intangible source of life and creation. To achieve these two dimensions, I argue

that we need first and foremost to develop and intensify our sensitivity to natural things, to feel nature, to let all the sounds of nature come to us, to the very inner soul of us. It is not enough to accumulate only scientific knowledge or abstract philosophy on nature, we need to sense and apprehend the spiritual essence of it as well. Here poetry and poetics come to light. In addition to the above mentioned Zen Void, other Asian philosophies offer us great wisdom in this poetic sense. There is Taoist Heaven and Earth, Confucian Ritual and Music, Buddhist Law of Nature, Hindu Cosmic Spirit and Shinto Way of Kami. Indian philosopher and poet Rabindranath Tagore pondered over art, nature and human condition in a true transcultural sense. Here is quoted one of his thoughts about art:

*'Art is the response of man's creative soul to the call of the real...
Art awakens a sense of the real by establishing an intimate
relationship between our inner being and the Universe at large,
bringing us a consciousness of deep joy...'*⁸

May I conclude just by quoting other poems of mine, which demonstrate clearly my own merger in a transcultural world. My poetic expression sometimes finds its voice and rhythm in a traditional Finnish way, but I feel best at home in another poetic tradition: my originally European perceptions and feelings dress themselves in a Japanese haiku form and have a coat of a Zen thinker in meditation, preferably in a garden or in the mountains:

<i>Mountains in my front</i>	<i>Tender air on stones</i>
<i>More silhouettes in my back</i>	<i>Radiating light on buds</i>
<i>Am I the valley?</i>	<i>Enchanting singing</i>

NOTES

- 1 *Kanteletar*, Finnish lyric folk epic, poems collected by Elias Lönnrot and first published in 1840. A jubilee illustrated edition, WSOY, Porvoo, 1985, p. 399.
- 2 *Hyaku-nin-isshu, A Hundred Verses from Old Japan*, translated by William Porter, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Tokyo, 1979, p. 3.
- 3 Makoto Ueda, *The Master Haiku Poet Matsuo Basho*, Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1982, p. 51.
- 4 *The 3rd Mainichi Haiku Contest*, publication of results, Tokyo, 1999, p. 224.
- 5 Taisen Deshimaru, *La Pratique du Zen*, Editions Seghers, Paris, 1977, pp. 241-246.
- 6 Yusa Michiko, *Zen & Philosophy, An intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitaro*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2002, p. 288.
- 7 Servomaa Sonja, *A Lacquered Box*, Editions des Ecrivains, Paris, 2002, pp. 49-51.
- 8 Tagore, Rabindranath on *Art and Aesthetics*, A Selection of Lectures, Essays and Letters, edited by Prithwish Neogy, published for International Cultural Centre by Orient Longmans, Calcutta, 1961, pp. 66 and 86.