

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELE

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THE GREAT BUDDHIST STATUE OF KAMAKURA

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## BUDDHISM IN JAPANESE LITERATURE

BY W. G. BLAIKIE MURDOCH

THE Japanese regard Unkei as the greatest of their Buddhist sculptors. He lived in the thirteenth century, and the story goes that, dying, he proceeded to Hell, whose monarch, Emma, addressed him angrily: "Of the numerous images you have wrought of me, not one has versimilitude. Wherefore you are condemned to return to earth, there to carve at length, a truthful likeness of myself." At the fane, Ennoji, Kamakura, there is an Emma sculpture by Unkei, of which till lately at least it was asserted, that this was the thing which the master executed, after his long journey to the nether regions. Clearly, the Japanese of old had a very lively dread of the Plutonian potentate in the Buddhist pantheon. And Unkei's powerful work being a wondrous, if not unsurpassed crystallization of the grim and the menacing, it was declared that the artist could not have fashioned it, unless he had seen the subject. Are there, in the written literature of Nippon, many things which, like this unwritten legend of the Ennoji sculpture, serve to illustrate Buddhist beliefs, in the Sunrise Land in historic times? The question summons a multitude of answers, and it will not be possible, in these brief pages, to do more than bring forward a little selection, of the references to the Light of Asia.

Originating in sinful passion, life is the great evil, says orthodox Buddhism, holding in consonance that the prime desideratum is, to escape from the world, with no danger of being reincarnated there, as Unkei was. Apart from historical writings which have much fiction in them, the oldest of Japanese prose-tales extant is *Takctari Monogatari*, or The Story of the Bamboo-Gatherer. Its authorship uncertain, it appears to date from the tenth century, at which time secular literature was still a thing, exclusively by and for the aristocracy. And it is therefore commonly assumed, that it was some scion of a noble house, who wrote the *Monogatari*. It relates how a tiny

lady was found in the hollow of a bamboo, how she grew to be a beautiful woman, how she was sought in marriage by a succession of wealthy and noble lovers. But meritoriously resisting as she did their importunities, she was allowed to flutter away to her celestial home. From that mystic realm, for some fault, she had been temporarily sent back to the vale of tears. And according to the commentary, in the best edition of the tale, it was beyond doubt written, with the intention of emphasizing the orthodox Buddhist beliefs above-mentioned.

Contemporaneous with this story is the *Tosa Nikki*, or Tosa Diary. The nobleman who wrote it, Kino Tsurayuki, records a journey from Tosa to Kyoto, the former place being in the island of Shikoku, far in the South of Nippon. It is noteworthy that never a word of religion comes in, till pirates menace the voyagers, prayers being straightway offered then on the junk, alike to the Buddhist and Shinto deities. The diarist speaks of the two pantheons as distinct, yet seems to have had equal faith in both. Here is a remarkable emblem, of the dawn of the union in Japan, between the Indian religion and the indigenous Japanese one.

Apparently, in Tsurayuki's time, numerous of the Buddhist clergy did indeed practice a rigid asceticism. In the *Makura no Soshi*, or Pillow Sketches, by Sei Shonagon, a court lady of that time, the authoress bewails the sadness of letting a favorite son become a priest, "for it will be miserable for him, to have to look on the pleasant things of life, as if they were chips of wood." Also living about Tsurayuki's day, and like Sei Shonagon a lady of the court, Izumi Shikibu is remembered by her *Nikki*. She had two lovers besides a husband, but her emotions led her to be religious. And she reveals in her diary, that she would go to a Buddhist temple, offer ardent prayer, then suddenly realize that she was thinking of one of her paramours, instead of her immortal soul.

Sarashina is a place-name, and the *Sarashina Nikki* is by Miss Takasue. In 1017 her father, a man of the aristocracy, was appointed governor of Kazusa near Tokio, or Yedo as called in historic times. He took with him to Kazusa his daughter, then in her teens; and it is with happenings in her life, at and about that age, that her diary is concerned. In her day, the Yedo neighborhood was still thought of as uncouth, still considered very far from Kyoto, the metropolis. At her father's place of governorship, the authoress was badly off for girl friends of her own age and social status. She used to pray that she might go to Kyoto, and she discloses her care-

lessness towards theological accuracy; for the god to whom she made her petition was Yakushi Nyorai, the physician of the Buddhist pantheon. After eventually settling at the capital, one night the diarist had a dream, wherein a priest counselled her to verse herself in the fifth chapter of the *Hokkekkyo*, otherwise The Scripture of the Lotus of the True Law. Surely, the day before her dream, the young lady had been thinking much about some hierarch, whom she had once heard, beautifully intoning the sacred words.

It will, perhaps, be argued that, if in Miss Takasue's day, books were as yet a thing only for the nobility, the writings which have been cited above do not necessarily throw light, on modes of faith with the populace in the middle ages. But there is a folk-song, dating from the twelfth century if not earlier, which execrates the man who plies the trade of *ukai*, or cormorant-fishing. The verses ask, in grimly serious tone, what terrible lot will be accorded on his rebirth, to the person who has been engaged in this cruel form of taking life. If the *Taketori Monogatari* adumbrates, that belief in soul-transmigration early gripped the Japanese of the upper classes, so also does the folk-song suggest if not prove that, by the twelfth century, the belief was likewise common with the toiling myriads. Small wonder if, dreading horrible rebirth, people were awed when Unkei employed his talent, to remind them of the ferocious aspect of the king of Hell, who would some day pass judgment on them!

That century of the great sculptor's doings, the thirteenth, looked also on the literary activities of Hamuro Tokinaga, who was a scion of a ducal house, and a member of the Imperial Council. He is credited with the *Heike Monogatari*, or Stories of the Family of Hei or Taira, a fine quasi-historical work which, recounting the civil wars of the eleven-hundreds, quickly gained wide favor among the military aristocracy. In historic times, the usual collective term for the Buddhist gods was Hotoke; it is by that appellation Tsurayuki speaks of them, in the *Tosa Nikki*. And, in the *Heike Monogatari*, there is a curious part about a dancing-girl, who has called herself Hotoke. It was as though some wag, of the music halls in the Occident, should assume the designation of the Man of Sorrows. Tokinaga relates how the lady goes to pay attentions to Taira Kiyomori, at a date when that soldier was omnipotent in Japan. "Call yourself what name you please . . . but get out at once," he says, angry at the dancer's impertinence in approaching him, yet seemingly caring nothing about her sacrilegiousness. An eloquent pass-

age, in the *Heike*, is the description of the close of the sea fight in 1185 at Dannoura, near Shimonoseki. The nurse of the boy Mikado, who weeps at the approach of death, calls on him to look Eastwards to Ise, the holy of holies of Shinto, then to look Westwards, whereby she signifies India, as birthplace of Buddhism. "Commit your soul," she cries, "to the care of the Buddhist gods, who will come from Paradise to meet you." And a moment later, the waves have enveloped her royal child.

If this glowing, tender page in the *Heike* is striking, as being of those things which denote the equality of Japanese feelings in the past, towards Buddhism and Shinto, of books in which Buddhist matter is salient there are few if any, so engaging as the *Tsurezure Gusa*, or Gleanings from Leisure. The author, Yoshida Kenko, lived at the end of the thirteenth century, and was personally of the clergy of the Light of Asia. As its title suggests, his work is a garland of miniature essays on a wide variety of themes. He reminds sharply that his fellow-priests were not all given to regarding as Sei Shonagon wrote, "the pleasant things of life, as if they were mere chips of wood." Telling of churchmen who were gluttonous or drunken, Kenko refers to others, fighting with swords, and of one he relates, that he was known as Bishop Nettle, by reason of his stinging temper. The essayist was conscious of nothing, if not the colossal power of women. It was not very priestly of him to observe that even a mighty elephant may be tethered securely, be the leash woven of maiden's hair. And long after Yoshida's own day, the Confucian philosopher, Muro Kyuso (1658-1734), assailed the author of the *Tsurezure Gusa* as an adulterer. It is noteworthy, however, that in none of the pages of the miscellany which are about women, is there any tone of lewdness. Invariably refined in his writing, the essayist was possibly a member of the True Sect of the Pure Land, whose clergy were allowed to marry. In the Gleanings he speaks against those marriages which are merely arranged, having about them no romance. And he exclaims: "If a man, though past forty, falls in love, who shall presume to blame him?"

It must not be thought, that Kenko's fellow-churchmen are exhibited in his book, exclusively as bad. He tells of some who were studious, or who had gained the esteem of their flocks. As to himself in his professional character, the impression is strongly received that he was a gentle, friendly, sympathetic creature, whose pastoral duties were probably done well, performed the better because the priestly essayist was so very human. Conceivably his pages

against sports, which entail the killing of animals, had basis in this gentleness of his nature, rather than in orthodox firmness of belief in the theory, that sinful man is in danger of being reborn as a lower animal. For it would seem that Kenko, with his sharp mind, sometimes tended to agnosticism. He remarks significantly, that certain chapters are lacking in the Buddhist Scriptures; he charges himself not to be sceptical, about the capacity of the Buddhist gods. With good Buddhists it is thought very essential to keep ceaselessly in mind the transitoriness of this life, as too of all things connected with it, whatever the delight they afford. Descanting on house and garden, and enlarging on the charm which may pertain to these mundane belongings, the author of the *Gusa* mingles with this disquisition, a call on his readers to remember the merely temporary character of a home on earth. And it is felt that this pious counsel, far from being brought in as an hierarchal obligation, represents the honest sentiment of the essayist, at the moment of writing. In another page of the *Gleanings* he observes: "Be not forgetful of the future state. Truly enviable is he, who is not unfamiliar with the path to Buddhahood." And this, as likewise the various similar things in the *Gusa*, utterances of piety, have the ring of deep sincerity. They are crystallizations of genuine, if fleeting moods of devoutness.

There is no rhyme in Japanese literature. And, in the plays whose generic name is *No*, or Accomplishment, the formula consisted in prose, into which were woven metrical portions, usually with lines of seven syllables alternating with lines of five. It was near the close of the thirteen-hundreds, that the *No* plays entered on their golden age, this same continuing till late in the sixteenth century. And the finest things, in these dramas, are among the most beautiful gems of Nippon's fashioning. Frequently embodying learned illusions to ancient Chinese or Japanese classics, the *No* pieces are furthermore written in most courtly language. Hence, they could scarcely make much appeal to the crowd; and it was chiefly the aristocracy, who were the patrons of Accomplishment. Very little is known about the dramatists themselves. But of such things, in the secular literature of Japan, as admit of being spoken of collectively, there is none so rich in Buddhist matter, as *No* in the halcyon time of the art. A number of the dramas, like the *Taketori Monogatari* long before, were beyond doubt composed with didactic aim.

The *No* writers were largely concerned with subjects culled from Japanese history. The *Heike Monogatari* was among the works, from which those men were wont to derive topics. And there is a *No* piece by Kwanze Motokiyo (1375-1455), in which the girl, Hotoke, is depicted as passing eventually to the extreme opposite from the dancer's profession, namely as becoming a Buddhist nun. A specially fine play is *Kumasaka*, by Zenchiku Ujinobu (1414-1499?), the title being the name of the hero. At the outset one of the characters, encountering a priest, implores him to pray for the soul of a person who has died on this day of their meeting, which occurs at nightfall. The churchman declares that he does not think it right to pray, unless he is told the name of the dead man. The other has reasons for concealing the name: "But his grave lies in the green field, beyond the tall pine tree. He cannot enter the gates of the Pure Land, wherefore I beseech you for your orisons." And the man in holy orders is prevailed on to comply: "Unto all mortals let there be equal grace, to pass from this life of agony, by the portals of death into law, into the realm of peace."

In at least one of the *No* dramas, the tenets of the Zen Shu, or Contemplation Sect of Buddhism, are brought into prominence. This work is *Sotoba Komachi*, by Kwanze Kiyotsugu (1354-1406); Miss Komachi is the name of the heroine, an actual personage in history; and *sotoba* is the Japanese for the Sanskrit word, *stupa*, meaning a small tower which conserves a Buddhist relic. With the opening of the play, Miss Komachi is reprimanded by priests for having taken a seat on a *stupa*, which action she defends because, in the Zen philosophy, sacred books or images or relics are nothing, self-mastery everything. The didactic element in *No* sometimes takes the form of admonitions to remember that ills in this life are due to sins in a former state. "It is through our having failed to keep the Buddhist commandments, in a previous existence, that we are brought to ruin now," declares a woman in one of the pieces by the writer already mentioned, Motokiyo. In another work by him, its title being a place-name, *Kantan*, the central character, Rosei, observes sadly that, though born a man, he has not even endeavored to tread the narrow path of righteousness. His inference is that, as it was great fortune to be reincarnated human, instead of as one of the lower animals, he ought to have striven the more zealously after Buddhahood. In this same play, there is handled the Buddhist doctrine, that nothing exists save in the imagination of people. Rosei speaks plaintively of the world as "a path of dreams, a realm where

all is mere seeming." And as the drama unfolds, he falls into a sleep, a vision being vouchsafed to him. In it he learns the importance of renouncing whatsoever things are of the earth earthy. For it is only by such renunciation, maintains the dramatist, that man may hope to break the shackles, which bind him to endless returning to the mundane life.

Waiving things which were circulated orally, Japanese popular literature begins with the seventeenth century. When, at the dawn of the Tokugawa period (1603-1868), baronial turbulence was quelled, and comfort thus at length given to the masses, there sprang into existence theatres, served by playwrights who frankly appealed to the great plurality. The upper class utterly despised these places, never entering them, so that *No* performances became, in even larger degree than hitherto, a thing for the aristocracy. But in the popular plays, the formula was the same as in *No*: prose interspersed with metric portions, in alternating lines of seven and five syllables.

Of the dramatists catering for the crowd was Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724). Among his earliest pieces was *Shaka Nyorai Sanjoe*, or The Picture of the Birth of Sakyamuni; it opens with a dispute, between the mother and aunt of the alleged founder of Buddhism, and it culminates with his death. This play gained no wide success, however, episodes in Japanese history being the subjects, in most of the favorite popular dramas. Naturally, there figures in them, belief in the power of the Buddhist deities to cure bodily ills, and belief in the doctrine of rebirth in this world. Nevertheless, nearly the most salient trait with the new playwrights, was a fondness for blood and thunder, which things they were addicted to mingling with magical events of a most sensational description. Ki no Kaion, writing early in the eighteenth century, gained high renown with his *Komachi Miyako no Toshidama*, or Miss Komachi's New Year Gift at the Capital. This work is about the lady who has been spoken of as heroine of a *No* piece, in which the wise tenets of the Contemplation Sect are brought forward. But Kaion's drama, far from enshrining matter so fine as that, embodies a scene in which Buddhist priests are summoned, to do battle with a female goblin, who assures them that, whatever the fervor of their prayer, they cannot quell her.

With the advent of theatres for the masses, printing almost suddenly came to be practiced on a big scale. In the year 1821. Ryutei Tanehiko published his story, *Ukiyogata Rokumai Byobu*, or Pictures of the Fleeting World, displayed on Six Screens. His

opening pages are an attack on the novelists of his time. And saying proudly, that his own tale contains no horrible gory things, he adds that there will not be found in it, "any revelations granted by the Buddhist gods to people, in the course of dreams." The truth is that the novelists, no less than the dramatists, were devotees of supernatural happenings of a sensational kind. Although Tanehiko's contemporary, Rokujuyen, was a man of considerable scholarship, the magical abounds in his *Hida no Takumi Monogatari*, or The Story of the Craftsman of Hida Province. It has for instance a scene in which the hero carves a sculpture of a Buddhist deity; and the image being put in the evening, at the bedside of a sick man, in the morning he is cured. The fantastic is common too, in the stories by Hokusai's friend, Kyokutei Bakin (1767-1848). But he was a fine writer, towering above the novelists of his day. And of the numerous things, in which he freely introduced Buddhist matter, perhaps the best is *Kumano Tayema Ama Yono Tsuki*, or Moonlight through the Clouds on a Night of Rain.

The scenes of this story are laid in the fourteenth century. The first characters described are a hunter and his wife, poor and humble people. Good Buddhist that she is, the wife endures distress, through her husband being daily occupied in the taking of life. Often trying to dissuade him from it, she reminds him that the souls, which he sinfully takes from bodies, may go into states yet more miserable than those from which he has reft them. On her death-bed the devout woman expresses a wish that her son should become a priest. He duly does so, entering the Shingon Shu, or New Word Sect. He falls in love with a lady musician; he utters bitter regret that he had not joined the sect with a married clergy; and eventually he casts aside his ordination vows. Later, there is brought into the tale a little girl who, in the hour of deep sorrow, exclaims that some day she will possibly have "a place on the lotus terrace." That is her way of designating Heaven, the lotus being held sacred by the Buddhists, a symbol of purity.

The writing of lyric verse was always regarded in Japan, merely as a polite accomplishment, not as a thing, fit for a man of letters to devote his life to. Invariably brief as the Occident counts length, the lyric poems are available, principally in anthologies; and in the case of numerous pieces in these books, the writers' names are unrecorded. With the brevity of the formulae they used, the lyrists were constrained to be concise in the extreme. Their mode was to suggest, rather than to state; and sometimes the things handled thus are

Buddhist topics, for example the transitoriness of human life. Through ages, it was widely felt desirable, for the fanes of the Light of Asia to be among trees, such environment being thought conducive to devotional sentiments. And here is an anonymous poem which, dating from subsequent to Bakin's time, alludes happily to this idea about the trees:

“The birds are calling as they fly,  
 Oh whither, whither, is their quest?  
 Up from the fields they soar on high,  
 On forest temple's roof to rest.”

People who write about the East, without having acquired an Eastern tongue, are prone to enlarge on those outward things in the life of the Japanese, say the chopsticks and sandals, which render the nation singular. They fail to realize that, in inward things, the Japanese trenchantly illustrate the truth, that a touch of nature makes the world kin. Similarly, people who write about Oriental religions, without having lived among Oriental folk, are prone to expatiate on a maze of theological hair-splittings which, emanating from a few Buddhist saints, were at no time current with more than a fractional number of the denizens of Nippon. If in *Kantan*, a philosophic conception is brought in, if in *Sotoba Komachi* the tenets of a particular Buddhist sect are introduced, those two plays are somewhat anomalous in Japanese secular writings. The other items, which have been brought forward, were most selected as typical of still further and numerous items, and because they seem to body forth the very heart of faith in historic Japan. If her popular playwrights and novelists were addicted, to the utilizing of religious matter of a magical and most sensational kind, would it not be very easy to name, in the literatures on mediaeval Europe, analogies to this predilection? If the Japanese of old had a lively dread of being reborn in the vale of tears, is not this an echo of the waning Occidental belief in a material Hell? Bakin's sad little girl, dreaming of Heaven; the same writer's priest, cursing his celibacy; Yoshida Kenko, the one day pious, the next, prattling about ladies; Izumi Shikibu, immoral, yet drawn into worship by emotional forces; Ki no Tsurayuki, prayerful because there was danger—how familiar all these seem, how reminiscent! In the East, as in the West, temples are before everything else, places, as Wordsworth writes finely,

“Where simple sufferers bend in trust,  
 A happier hour to find.”