1 Travel as spiritual quest in Japan

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Introduction

This chapter wishes to introduce the important terms related to pilgrimage in Japan. At the same time the concepts of pilgrimage, travel and quest as they materialize within Japanese culture need to be contextualized within the framework of Buddhist thinking, arguably the foundation upon which Japanese identity and life design has been shaped.

Buddhism is not always recognized or given credit for its fundamental role in Japanese society. This is partly because some insist that Shintō should be considered as separate from and at the same time older than Buddhism and therefore more basic. Buddhism indeed amalgamated elements – some of them very old – from a vast array of East-Asian traditions of thought, becoming extremely complex and difficult to define in the process. Moreover, Buddhism has not been an official religion in Japan like Christianity was in the West.[1] Yet the fact that Japan has not had an official religious doctrine may be considered the very reason why Buddhist thought, on the level of everyday common sense and outside conceptual problems created by the acceptance or rejection of doctrine and belief, has more precisely and more decisively shaped Japanese patterns of thinking throughout the ages than anything else. Buddhism, in other words, I take to be the major and at the same time unquestioned source for day-to-day solutions to the problems of life, and as a guiding principle for the structure of life's quests. How, then, can the structures of life's quests, pilgrimage and the concept of travel be linked together?

Travel in context

Travel in Japanese history falls broadly into two categories. On the one hand it was a means of getting from one place to another. Examples are the transport of goods (in early times often tribute), the voyage to a place of assignment, or the way of life of a travelling merchant or salesman. On the other hand, however, what I would like to call 'spiritual journeys' play an important role in East-Asian culture quite generally. Thus, for many hundreds of years, the people of Japan have undertaken journeys for spiritual gain, and these can be seen to possess characteristic structural patterns.

A first decisive point to understand is that nature (that includes villages and towns together with the life and housing styles of the people) is believed to contain the energies of the universe in a concrete way. Therefore nature always 'speaks', that is, it gives the careful observer clear indications of its principles. If we explain the energies of the universe as the flow of *yin* and *yang* and the continuous process of transformation (minutely dealt with in the context of divination), or if we think of the many kinds of charts produced by Buddhist institutions, which always must be interpreted with reference to concrete points in nature, i.e. in time and space (calendars, geomantic charts or charts for ancient Asian medical treatment, etc.), then I think we can grasp in what sense nature is conceived of as a context in which such energies are at work.

To understand the relationship between nature and Buddhist teaching we need to reflect upon the fact that nature mirrors the law of cause and effect. This law can be seen to take shape in and through nature in a myriad of different ways: for instance it can be embodied in a warbler, being aroused as *a cause of* the increasing warmth (i.e. *yang* energy) of the second month; or in the vivid red colour of the maple leaves, thought of as being *caused by* the increasing cold (i.e. the increase of *yin* energy). To intuitively grasp the law of the universe and with it Buddhist teaching, it is necessary to travel to specific spots in nature traditionally known to be helpful for achieving a deeper understanding of it. These spots, in other words, can be said to aid human beings in their efforts to cope with the law of cause and effect (the law of the universe) in order to survive.

As we know, journeys for seeking pleasure (from the healing at hot springs to the release of sexual pleasure) have always been a prominent feature of Japanese culture. The laws of the universe being, by definition, present in everything, it is a matter of interpretation how far these places of pleasure are defined as Buddhist, and how far the comfort experienced there is taken to be an act of ordering the flow of energies within one's body, and overcoming the state of suffering caused by disruption of the flow. However, even if Buddhist teaching defines places which arouse your emotion as places of illusion, or even as bad places, they are still understood to contain the seeds of salvation. They may be bad, but coming to understand this is the first step to enlightenment and will cultivate detachment. Bad places thus become good places.

The path to enlightenment, in other words, is a path of transformation, a sequence of stations in which seeds of Buddhist truth *cause* the onward journey. Basically, all human beings start out on their path full of *bonnō* (earthly passions and desires), which cause spiritual and physical suffering and impede the quest for enlightenment. According to the expression *bonnō sunawachi bodai* (desire is nothing else than enlightenment), one can indeed attain enlightenment, not by extinguishing, but by gradually transforming illusions and desires into enlightened wisdom.

Throughout the ages, journeys have been undertaken, either physically or mentally (i.e. in pictures, stories, poetry or songs), that follow this pattern of transformation, adding up, one by one, the things understood at each specific station. Put another way, movement from place to place always implies spiritual process, whereby the careful observer comes to understand the essence of, and the reasons for, suffering. A good example may be the poet Bashō (1644–1694), who – emulating Japan's most famous traveller, Saigyō (1118–1190) – passes places where nature shows the changing constellations of its energies against the background of the cycle of growth and decay. In the process the poet is continuously confronted with the concept of time, the past, the present, and the future. Precisely the experience of time, both in its positive sense (enjoying the moment) and its negative sense (the frantic wish to cling to the moment or even return to the past), brings about the understanding that one is caught in the karmic cycle, blinded by physical and emotional attachment (*shūnen, shūchaku*). Only through detachment, however, are spiritual growth, enlightenment and achievement of Buddhahood possible. This understanding, to repeat, can in traditional Japanese common sense only be gained by 'wide awake' movement through time and space, that is, by means of a journey, even if this journey is only imagined.

Saigyō, whose reflections on this law and the intuitive grasp of its principles are documented in his poems, 'left his house and home' (*shukke*) in 1140 CE. On a superficial level, this *shukke* took him to Tōhoku, Mt. Kōya, Shikoku, Ise, and again to Tōhoku. On a deeper level, however, *shukke* took him on a journey that opened his eyes to the reality of growth and decay, and brought him to realize the fundamental importance of detachment.

Shukke implies entering Buddha's way by making the decision to leave all one loves and hates behind and setting out to seek enlightenment through ascetic exercises and training (*shugyō*). Certainly, this concept of setting out must not only be interpreted in terms of coping with growth and decay in this life, it must also be understood against the background of the notion of *rinne* (the transmigration of the soul and the repeated cycles of life, death and rebirth). Setting out on a journey marked by exercises and efforts is thus an act whose relevance, in theory at least, transcends a person's own this-worldly physical identity.

As pointed out above, setting out on a journey *is* not detachment, it is a path to detachment, and this in turn is a process of transformation through training, a process characterized by steps and stations that each in their own way force the traveller to deal with the question of how to detach himself.

Traditions of leaving house and home

Japan once knew – and to a limited degree still knows – a large variety of persons who set out from home and 'went into the wilderness'. Many of these people led a life as wandering priests, often selling certain products as well as knowledge – mainly related to curing sickness and bringing relief from all imaginable kinds of suffering – in order to earn a livelihood. Japanese art traditions (theatre, music, painting, etc.), for instance, can only be understood by reference to the teachings of these detached persons, wandering or cloistered priests and monks, holy men, but also persons with magic powers, healing men, medicine priests, exorcists and many others known as *hijiri* (persons with magic powers, sages, masters),

shami (young persons doing *shugyō*, also: married monks), *inja* (literally persons in hiding, usually in the mountains) or *gyōja* (persons who are achieving, or have achieved, powers by doing *shugyō*, persons being led – often in the mountains – from hardship to hardship). The expression *sen* (or *sennin*), referring more specifically to the Taoist recluse, also should be mentioned here.

In contrast to monks in the strict sense of the word, whose duties required them always to be part of a cloistered community, the numerous forms of wandering monks or priests referred to as *yugyō hijiri* (*hijiri* who move around freely) can, I maintain, be seen as the real source of popular culture, culture to which the common people had access and that formed their most basic values and patterns of thinking. Some *yugyō hijiri* regarded themselves as embodiments of Amida Buddha, adopted the element '*-ami*' in their names, were granted protection by specific temples or feudal lords and became well-known masters of traditions such as Nō theatre, which was the creation mainly of Kan'ami (1333–1384) and his son Zeami (approx. 1363–approx. 1443).

Naturally there is a relationship between wandering 'spiritual men' (women also are known to have wandered, e.g. the *bikuni* of Kumano, or the original Kabuki dancers) and the spread of knowledge about sacred places. These sacred places were believed to grant good health, provide cures for diseases and, as an extension of this, wealth and happiness. On a deeper level, they would (or at least theoretically should) help in understanding the ephemeral nature of all things (*mujō*), thus bringing about detachment from the karmic cycle of growth and decay.

Movement as a sequence of spiritual steps

It is no coincidence that Japanese descriptions of journeys and travel place great emphasis on the stations leading a traveller somewhere. This focus on, and interest in, stations is so strong that we are often under the impression of dealing with the pure accumulation of pictures, texts or data that have little or no coherence – a criticism that is, for instance, often levelled at Japanese literature. However, to set out on a journey means to discover the infinite and unexpected ways in which the energies of the universe become form, and the opportunity to practise detachment and be healed – or feel better – as one goes along. Often, an individual step towards detachment need not be more than just the vague sense of having discovered something, and (as poetry and discovery are closely related in Japanese culture) perhaps capturing this something in a haiku.

The notion of steps and stations (towards detachment and thus enlightenment), to repeat, is a very basic one in Japanese culture. Accordingly, steps form the framework for all learning – traditional musical pieces contain a *dan* (step-for-step) structure, as do the martial arts, travel literature, collections of poetry, or the famous 53 Stations of the Tōkaidō by the woodcut print master Hiroshige (1797–1858). The pattern of expression is always the same: it is the description of a path, on which insight after insight is added by making careful observations and appropriate efforts.

Against this background it is possible to fathom the deeper implications of pilgrimage, which can at the same time be understood as a path to enlightenment and a path to good health and good fortune. Historically, a particularly important type of pilgrimage was the journey into the Kumano Mountains. These mountains were associated with concepts of paradise (at the goal, Kumano Hongū) and the help of numerous *ōji* (princes) along the way, important landmarks being the waterfall at Nachi or the Healing Buddha (Yakushi Nyorai) at Shingū Hayatama Jinja. Local *yamabushi* (mountain priests, mountain ascetics, also known as Buddhist masters of exorcism) and *bikuni* (Buddhist nuns) would lead the pilgrims – including emperors – along the paths that helped to grasp the meaning of imprisonment in the karmic cycle (i.e. the inability to understand the illusionary nature of the concrete world), and thus to attain the true meaning of detachment.

The Kumano pilgrimages were most popular during the Kamakura period (1192–1333). In the early nineteenth century there were still around 14,000 pilgrims to the Kumano Mountains per year. One of the final steps of the Kumano pilgrimage, namely Nachi with its waterfall, is also the first station of one of the best known pilgrim routes in Japan, that covering the 33 temples of Kannon in Western Japan (Saigoku or Saikoku) in the present-day prefectures of Wakayama, Osaka, Nara, Kyōto city, Kyōto prefecture, Shiga, Hyōgo and Gifu. This pilgrimage of temples dedicated to the bodhisattva Kannon,[2] who takes 33 forms in order to help mankind, is a typical *junrei*, a pilgrimage following a precise sequence of steps.

Junrei

Moving through time and space and the step-for-step process of seeking relief and enlightenment by following Buddhist teaching and/or the teachings of wise men of old (who in turn had followed Buddhist teachings) is, I maintain, the basic idea of spiritual journey in Japanese culture. Accordingly, I see *junrei*, i.e. moving through time and space from station to station, as the basic form of travel for spiritual gain. We may note here that the concept of *junrei* was so fundamental that all sorts of devices were sought to enable people to undertake *junrei* even if they could not visit the famous sites themselves. One device was *utsushi*, the transfer of the power of the original sites to corresponding sites more easily accessible. The best known *utsushi* are those of the 33 Kannon sanctuaries of Western Japan to Bandō and to Chichibu in eastern Japan, or of the 88 stations of the Shikoku pilgrimage to the small island of Shōdoshima. Another common device was the transfer of soil from the original site to a neighbourhood temple, enabling the *junrei* to be performed in miniature.

Mairi

As a rule, *junrei* consist of a series of visits (*mairi*) to places possessing the power to heal, to help, to guide, to bring something to awareness and to free from frustration, which is a state of mind that quite particularly hinders detachment. With time,

numerous *mairi* themselves, i.e. the visit to just one specific place of 'power', became the object of making a journey. *Mairi* (or the honorific expression *o-mairi*), can also be spoken of as *sankei* (visit to a sanctuary) or *sanpai* (paying respects to a sanctuary). Examples for well-known *mairi* in Japanese history are those to Narita, Zenkōji (Nagano), Atsuta, Tateyama, Hikosan, Sumiyoshi, Kiso Ontake, Daisen, Konpira, and above all Ise.

Mairi to Ise, originally a place where the ancestors of the emperor were worshipped, became popular towards the end of the Heian period (794–1192 CE) when special guides (known as *o-shi*) were sent out to attract supporters for the Ise sanctuary where the sun goddess Amaterasu (or Shinmei-sama) was venerated. As early as the Muromachi period (1336–1573) a visit to Ise was seen to have the highest priority in a person's life. During the Kyōho era (1716–1735) of the Edo period (1603–1867) it is assumed that about 500,000 to 600,000 people travelled there. Moreover, Ise can easily be termed old Japan's most 'intra-national' centre, as it was here that people from all parts of the country met and exchanged not only knowledge of local histories and news but also of all sorts of arts and crafts.

It also should be mentioned here that those who journeyed throughout Japan to advertise Ise brought *miyage* (today the common expression for a little present brought back from a trip or a visit) with them, consisting of a wide variety of amulets, charms, books and products made or collected in Ise. The term *miyage* is also used for local products and the amulets, charms and talismans (*o-fuda*, *o-mamori*) brought home from Ise (and other sanctuaries) by persons sent there on behalf of whole communities.

Pilgrimages, especially to Ise, appear also to have been the way for a considerable percentage of the population to obtain permission to travel. And, last but not least, the connection between Ise and *nuke-mairi* (secret visit to a sanctuary) shows that in the Edo period the journey to Ise was a way for couples to elope without committing a punishable offence.

Kō

At least a short reference should also be made to the term *kō*, denoting a group of people with a common aim – an association. *Kō* were organizations that planned and prepared pilgrimages, the best known ones being the *Ise-kō* (or *Shinmei-kō*: *kō* for the visit of Shinmei-sama, i.e. the sun goddess Amaterasu). *Ise-kō* came into existence in large numbers in the early Muromachi period and were organizations, usually centred upon a particular *o-shi* (guide) from Ise, which organized and financed journeys to Ise either for groups of villagers, or for a representative of a village.

The importance of *kō* cannot be stressed enough, as they have constituted the focal point of a community where funds were raised, help was distributed, and a large variety of undertakings were organized and paid for. To what extent the *kō* – indeed until very recently – retained their primary function as an organizational framework specifically for visits to a religious site, however, can be seen, for instance, by studying the stone tablets set up by all sorts of different *kō* along the path to the sanctuary on the peak of Mt. Mitake near Tokyo.

Conclusion

As an afterthought, I believe we should be only moderately optimistic with regard to grasping more than just a few fundamental notions about spiritual journeys in Japan. For one thing, the Buddhist concept of journey has been quite considerably modified by many different schools of teaching. Furthermore, on the level of interpretation, ideas rooted in Buddhism have become obscured by the decades of State Shintō's systematic efforts at establishing mystical Japaneseness in the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. Few Japanese realize today that even Ise, where the idea of Shintō and the primacy of indigenous over foreign deities was propagated as early as the Muromachi period, cannot be understood without reference to that immense framework of Buddhism that served to transmit systematic concepts of the structure of the universe.

Moreover, our task is made particularly difficult, since in order to grasp the ideas underlying the concept of journey in Japan it may indeed be necessary to look back mainly at the centuries prior to the Edo period, i.e. prior to 1603. The more recent centuries quite clearly make use of, play with, and reinterpret the given Buddhist substratum, which in the process certainly changed its *surface* structure – a point we can fathom if we, for instance, juxtapose the older Nō and the younger Kabuki forms of Japanese theatre.

However, if we keep our eyes open there are still plenty of objects we can find and buy today that inform us of the Buddhist view of the structure of time and space – we need just to study the materials sold at a temple shop. Moreover, the fundamental concepts of journey are still there, and remain more or less intact. We need only to think of how deeply ingrained feelings are about the importance and even training of detachment (especially emotional detachment) in everyday Japanese life, or of the idea of step-by-step transformation that always observes, reflects upon and accepts lower, 'bad' stations as containing the seeds for improvement and enlightenment. This, I maintain, is what physical or imagined journeys in Japan are really all about.

Notes

1 If we want to speak of an 'official doctrine' in Japan then it has been, for almost a millennium, Neo-Confucianism, i.e. the teaching of Shushi/Zhu Xi (1130–1200 CE), which left its imprint mainly in concepts of social order.

2 A bodhisattva is one who aspires to Buddhahood, i.e. to enlightenment, and carries out altruistic practices, but postpones their own entry into nirvana in order to save others; compassion is the bodhisattva's greatest characteristic.

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