

# JAPANESE WAKA

NOTES & TRANSLATIONS PATRICK DONNELLY & STEPHEN D. MILLER



Between the early tenth and the fifteenth centuries, the Japanese emperors ordered the compilation of twenty-one anthologies of poetry. These translations are of Buddhist-themed poems from the *Shūishū* (1011), *Goshūishū* (1086), *Kin'yōshū* (1125) and *Senzaishū* (1188), respectively the third, fourth, fifth and seventh anthologies.

This particular selection of eleven poems circles around the theme of “passages.” Of the life passages that are common to both our own culture and medieval Japanese culture, the Buddhist poems of the imperial anthologies primarily address two: ordination (taking the tonsure to become a Buddhist nun or priest) and death.

The first passage, from secular to religious life, was perhaps less analogous to becoming a priest or minister in our own time than to becoming a cloistered monk or nun. With few exceptions, taking this step meant separation from secular life, which made it difficult to contemplate for men and women of the Japanese imperial court. On the one hand, it was viewed as an important step toward committing to serious study of the Buddhist teachings. On the other hand, this step was viewed as a drastic rejection of the long-established pleasures, rituals and values of the court, especially for young men and women of important families for whom advancement to high rank or service at court was expected. (It also meant, in all likelihood, leaving the thriving capital, Heian-kyō, which was so admired that a move to the provinces was felt comparable to dropping off the Earth.) It’s not surprising, then, that poems which address taking the tonsure express ambivalence about the huge change it represented.

Death was perhaps the most frequent subject of the Buddhist poems in the imperial anthologies, so much so that anthologists initially gathered such poems with the *aishōka* (“lament”) poems. Even today in Japan, people turn to Buddhism primarily for rituals having to do with death, whereas they turn to the native kami-religion (Shinto) for birth, and to Shinto (or more recently to nominally-Christian) rituals for marriage. In these poems, death is primarily seen as an urgent incentive to Buddhist study.

Two of these poems, *Shūishū* 1333 and 1334, comprise a *zōtōka*, a poem exchange between two people, of which many are represented in the imperial anthologies. In this instance, the writers explicitly compare the state of mourning after a death to the state of dissatisfaction with worldly life that led some to take the tonsure. One poem here, *Senzaishū* 1199/1202, does address the subject of birth—or rather, rebirth into the world of samsara, seen as an

inevitable consequence of birth and death, unless enlightenment intervenes to release a person from the cycle.

Three of these poems address the theme of passages more literally. The topic of *Shūishū* 1329 is how impermanence (*mujo*) manifests in the passage of time: the approaching end of day as a metaphor for the brevity of life. *Goshūishū* 1192 and 1193 both allude to the Seventh Chapter of the Lotus Sutra, in which the Buddha teaches a parable about a guide who conjures an illusory city as a resting place for discouraged travelers. Like the poems that address taking the tonsure, the Conjured City poems express an almost humorous attitude toward the difficulty of the spiritual path: the speakers don’t suggest they’ll abandon the journey, but they do appreciate the resting place.

The originals of these poems are *waka*, the thirty-one-syllable form that was primary in Japanese poetics for over a millennium. Most of the poets were contemporary to the compilation of the anthology in which they appeared, though in some cases the compilers of the anthologies reached back to poets from earlier eras. The authors, even the poet-priests, were connected in some way either to the aristocracy or the imperial court.

Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century, but it was several hundred years before poems began to be written on Buddhist themes, in part because of the difficulty of addressing complex teachings in a thirty-one-syllable poem, and also because some Buddhist scriptures seemed to discourage the practice of what we would now call “creative writing.” In response, Japanese poets learned that they could make a lyric-meditative response to the teachings in *waka*. They also gradually developed a theoretical basis in which the writing of poems—especially those with Buddhist themes—was seen to support the goals of the teachings rather than to create conflict with them. Eventually some poets (such as Princess Senshi) came to assert that *waka* composition was a path to enlightenment contained within Buddhist practice itself and supportive of it. This reconciliation was achieved under the banner of *kyōgen kigo* (“wild words and fanciful phrases”), relying on the authority of a passage from the writings of the Chinese poet Po Chū-i:

*May my worldly works conceived in error in this life—*

*All the wild words and fanciful phrases—*

*Be transformed in the next into hymns of praise*

*That will glorify Buddhism through age after age*

*And turn the Wheel of the Law forever and ever.*



**NOTE** *Waka* were not given titles by their authors, but the compilers of the anthologies gave many poems a short prose preface. These prefaces, which addressed the poems’ thematic content or the occasions of their composition, are now considered aesthetically inseparable from the poems. In our translations, to join preface to poem in a way analogous to English poetry, we’ve presented prefaces as the poems’ titles, though in many cases we have tried to retain the prosy character of the prefaces.

with each call  
of the mountain temple bell  
as darkness falls  
I hear today too

is gone:

sad, knowing that—

—ANONYMOUS

*Shūishū* 1329

*yamadera no*

*iriai no kane no*

*koegoto ni*

*kyō mo kurenu to*

*kiku zo kanashiki*



Sent to a Certain Woman the Poet Knew When He  
Was in Mourning and Heard She Had Become a Nun

the “I” who grieves  
thought I was the only one  
to put on black—

but did you too  
give your back  
to a world of hurt?

— ŌNAKATOMI NO YOSHINOBU

*Shūishū* 1333

*sumizome no*

*iro wa ware nomi to*

*omoishi o*

*ukiyo o somuku*

*hito mo aru to ka*



A Reply to the Previous Poem

my reason  
“to put on black”  
may seem different—

but believe me:  
we wear that color  
together

—ANONYMOUS

*Shūishū* 1334

*sumizome no*

*koromo to mireba*

*yosonagara*

*morotomo ni kiru*

*iro ni zo arikeru*



Sent to Lesser Counselor Fujiwara Munemasa  
When the Poet Heard He Had Taken the Tonsure,  
as They Had Both Long Vowed to Do

if a breeze  
ripples off the shingle  
across the lake at Shiga

how much freshness  
must rest  
in your heart?

— KINTŌ

*Shūishū* 1336

*sazanami ya*

*shiga no urakaze*

*ika bakari*

*kokoro no uchi no*

*suzushikaruran*



A Ceremony at Yamashinadera  
Commemorating the Buddha’s Death

today’s tears

are the tears

of “if we had met”  
in that long-gone garden

of goodbye

— PRIEST KŌGEN

*Goshūishū* 1179

*inishie no*

*wakare no niwa ni*

*aeritomo*

*kyō no namida zo*

*namida naramashi*



Parable of the Conjured City

without a little coddling—  
a mundery roof

under which to rest—  
how could anyone

find the true path?

—AKAZOME EMON

*Goshūishū* 1192

*koshiraete*

*kari no yadori ni*

*yasumezuba*

*makoto no michi o*

*ikade shiramashi*



Parable of the Conjured City

go back? halfway there?

because the road is long?

(though if I imagine  
there’s a place I might

rest for a moment

it does cheer me)—

—MOTHER OF YASUSUKE NO Ō

*Goshūishū* 1193

*michi toomi*

*nakazora nite ya*

*kaeramashi*

*omoeba kari no*

*yado zo ureshiki*



When people were composing poems on the  
*Eight Eta Metaphors*, the author wrote this

On the Passage “This Body Is Like An Illusion”

ignoring the thought  
*when will it end?*

do I while away  
my life in this world

that is  
a shimmering

mirage  
of a mirage?

— KAIJIN HŌSHI

*Kin’yōshū* 641/684

*itsu o itsu to*

*omoiayumite*

*kagerō no*

*kagerō hodo no*

*yo o sugusuran*



As the Author Breathed His Last

I entrusted my

heart unceasingly to

you Amida Buddha:

your causeless vow—

don’t break it

— TAGUCHI SHIGEYUKI

*Kin’yōshū* 646/690

*tayumi naku*

*kokoro o kakuru*

*mida hotoke*

*hitoyari narana*

*chikai tagau na*



On the Essence of the Metaphor “Our Bodies Are Like Bubbles  
on Water” from the Ten Metaphors of the Yūima-Kyō

this body  
keeps returning

to the sad world

like foam  
on the water that

disappears here

to be reborn

over there

— FORMER MAJOR COUNSELOR KINTŌ

*Senzaishū* 1199/1202

*koko ni kie*

*kashiko ni musubu*

*mizu no awa no*

*ukiyo ni meguru*

*mi ni koso arikere*



**ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS**

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