

Kenko, Kerouac, Snyder, Prayer

By William Eaton

A book by an American scholar of Japanese literature briefly discusses one of the anecdotes of *The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*, a classic which dates back to the fourteenth century. The scholar, Linda Chance, offers the following translation:

A priest of the Ninnaji, regretting that he had not paid his respects at Iwashimizu [a Shinto shrine not far from Kyoto] before growing old, took it into his head to do so and set out alone on foot. He prayed at Gokurakuji and Kōra, then returned, convinced that this was all of it. When he met his fellows, he announced “I’ve accomplished something I had long planned. It was even more wonderful than I’d heard. But everyone who came to worship climbed the mountain. I was curious as to what might be going on, but aware that my purpose was to pray to the gods, I didn’t go up the mountain to see.” However small the undertaking, one ought to have a guide.¹

Chance says this section is “regarded as humorous,” with Kenko making fun of the priest (who might be he himself) for having made this trip yet failing to really visit the shrine and for then underscoring his buffoonishness by talking of it.² But I am not sure that—in Chance’s translation—this priest is indeed such a fool or that Kenko regarded him as one. And, as regards *The Tsurezuregusa* and most any work of art or phenomenon more generally, I certainly share Chance’s suggestion that we “face every passage with open eyes rather than treating them familiarly as old acquaintances.”³

¹ This anecdote now comprises segment 52 of the canonical text of *The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*. Note, however, that the earliest versions of this text were not divided into segments, nor did they feature punctuation. Chance’s translation appears in her *Formless in Form: Kenko, Tsurezuregusa, and the Rhetoric of Japanese Fragmentary Prose* (Stanford University Press, 1997).

² In fact, such a reading is more encouraged by the standard English translation of Kenko, by Donald Keene—*Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*; Columbia University Press, 1967—than it is by Chase’s translation, which I prefer. Keene would seem to have given himself the task of using translation, with explanatory footnotes, to offer twentieth-century American readers a clear idea of this quite foreign text, and this notwithstanding the fact that, as Keene himself says, Kenko’s style is characterized by “extreme vagueness” and has inspired a raft of interpretations. As regards the wandering priest, Keene explicates, in a footnote 3, that he had “visited two minor buildings, but did not realize that the main part of the shrine was on the mountain.” The justification for Keene’s explication is, of course, that contemporary readers of Kenko’s anecdote would have known what we foreigners now need to have explained.

³ Chance presents this as a suggestion from a Japanese scholar, Kubota Jen. *Formless in Form*, op. cit., 40.

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Reading Chance's translation of the anecdote I was immediately reminded of a story that Jack Kerouac recounted of coming from the urban East Coast to California and being taken hiking in Yosemite National Park by a young Gary Snyder. Snyder might be described as the prototypical American Japanese Buddhist. He studied at length in Japan and with not a little solemnity brought what he absorbed back to the United States and to the ways he lived and hiked and wrote poetry here.⁴ On the hike Snyder (fictionalized as "Japhy") is an enthusiastic, wisdom-spouting goat and Kerouac (in his text) a neophyte—unsure about what he's getting into, anxious, impressed, and resistant. When it comes time to make the final run up to and down from the peak before nightfall, Kerouac ("Ray Smith") says it's too high, he can't, it's not worth it, and he sits and waits and worries while Snyder, stripped down to his jockstrap, bounds ahead. It could be said that Kerouac, however unintentionally, is showing himself to be not only the dorkier, but also the more Buddhist of the two—recognizing the vanity of human goals and feats.⁵

⁴ I would note that for decades I have been a loyal reader of Gary Snyder's poems. I am a great fan of his quite early short poem, "Cartagena," the text of which I will copy below. It might be said that, more than many imports from Asian culture, this poem speaks directly about what it was like to be American in the aftermath of "our" victory in World War Two. I also have it in mind to write more about another rich Snyder work, a poetic rendition of a John Muir anecdote: [**John Muir on Mt. Ritter**](#).

"Cartagena," by Gary Snyder, dated "Columbia 1948 – Arabia 1958":

Rain and thunder beat down and flooded the streets
We danced with Indian girls in a bar,
 water half-way to our knees,
The youngest one slipped down her dress and danced bare to the waist,
The big negro deckhand made out with his girl on his lap
 in a chair her dress over her eyes
Coca-cola and rum, and rainwater all over the floor.
In the glittering light I got drunk and reeled through
 the rooms,
And cried, "Cartagena! swamp of unholy loves!"
And wept for the Indian whores who were younger than me,
 and I was eighteen,
And splashed after the crew down the streets wearing
 sandals bought at a stall
And got back to the ship, dawn came
 we were far out at sea.

⁵ Jack Kerouac, [*The Dharma Bums*](#), first published in 1958. When I now double-check the text, decades after I read it, I naturally find it doesn't entirely accord with and is more nuanced than my memory of it. Among other things, I am reminded that the book is a novel, and the Kerouac character, Ray Smith, is more impressed with and less mocking of Japhy (Snyder) than I had recalled. Here is the heart of the passage in question (from chapter 12):

I nudged myself closer into the ledge and closed my eyes and thought "Oh what a life this is, why do we have to be born in the first place, and only so we can have our poor gentle flesh laid out to such impossible horrors as huge mountains and rock and empty space," and with horror I remembered the famous Zen saying, "When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing." The saying made my hair stand on end; . . . Suddenly I heard a beautiful broken yodel of a strange musical and mystical intensity in the wind, and looked up, and it was Japhy standing on top of Matterhorn peak [in Yosemite National Park; 12,285 feet high] letting out his triumphant mountain-conquering Buddha Mountain Smashing song of joy. It was beautiful. It was funny, too, up here on the not-so-funny top of California and in all that

In Kenko's anecdote the priest does not simply not go up the mountain, he does this for a reason: to have more time for prayer, something Kerouac would seem to have forsaken. And what are we to make of Kenko's closing remark or quip, which Chance has translated as "However small the undertaking, one ought to have a guide"? To me, this is where the joke is. It's a bit as if Kenko, now transported to the twenty-first century, had concluded "Whatever." The priest gone to Iwashimizu is lacking a guide in the sense of lacking a *Lonely Planet Kyoto*. But he certainly has a guide in the more general sense of having a faith that puts prayer ahead of sightseeing or even shrine visiting. (And if he had wished he could have been guided by consensus and conformity, following everyone else up the mountain.)

Working on this piece I have returned to Kerouac's text, his novel *The Dharma Bums*. Among other things, I find he makes much of a phrase he describes as "the famous Zen saying, 'When you get to the top of a mountain, keep climbing.'" To me this exemplifies the worst of American post-war plundering of Asian religions. The booty, once brought to American soil or literature, becomes all-American; it could go on one of our T-shirts (and probably has), and it turns out to have no foreign content, instead serving as yet another of the many slogans with which Americans whip themselves to try yet harder to deny reality. (After all, the person who tries to keep climbing from the top of a mountain will be lucky to end up in a ravine with a broken leg.)

We might think, too, of the Buddhist concept of *sūnyatā*, traditionally translated as emptiness or non-self. What difference does it make if this priest happened to visit some buildings that have been labelled "minor" and didn't make it up to the ones labelled "major"? I am reminded too, in these over-touristed times, of the many tourists with their must-see sites, or of other people with their "bucket lists." A Japanese commentator has proposed that Kenko took up his brush, or was unable to remain silent, when faced with the

rushing fog. But I had to hand it to him, the guts, the endurance, the sweat, and now the crazy human singing: whipped cream on top of ice cream. I didn't have enough strength to answer his yodel. . . . Then suddenly everything was just like jazz: it happened in one insane second or so: I looked up and saw Japhy running down the mountain in huge twenty-foot leaps, running, leaping, landing with a great drive of his booted heels, bouncing five feet or so, running, then taking another long crazy yelling yodeling sail down the sides of the world and in that flash I realized it's impossible to fall off mountains you fool and with a yodel of my own I suddenly got up and began running down the mountain after him doing exactly the same huge leaps, the same fantastic runs and jumps, and in the space of about five minutes I'd guess Japhy Ryder and I (in my sneakers, driving the heels of my sneakers right into sand, rock, boulders, I didn't care any more I was so anxious to get down out of there) came leaping and yelling like mountain goats or I'd say like Chinese lunatics of a thousand years ago, . . .

Once down from the heights, the Kerouac character says to Japhy:

"Dammit that yodel of triumph of yours was the most beautiful thing I ever heard in my life. I wish I'd had a tape recorder to take it down."

"Those things aren't made to be heard by the people below," says Japhy dead serious.

realization of the swift approach of death.⁶ There is a sense in which we scramble up mountains and wait in lines at sites for much the same reason: feeling the swift approach of death. And the buffoon of a priest was wise and strong enough perhaps to realize that the mountain was high and he not strong, and in any case to just sit with his feelings. In my imagination, as he prayed he came to know better the longing and hoping against hope contained in prayer, and thus was better grounded than those running up and down mountains as night was falling.

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⁶ The words of this sentence quote exactly Linda Chance's paraphrase of a proposal made by the scholar of Japanese medieval literature Nishida Masayoshi. Chance, *Formless in Form, op. cit.*, 24.