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My Later Years

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Most people are probably familiar with my name through the fact that I taught at Columbia and through my works on Chinese and Japanese literature that were published by Columbia University Press. I would like here to say a few words about my years after leaving regular teaching in 1973, and, in particular, about my relations with the country of Japan, where I have lived more or less continually since then.

I remember the day I first arrived in Japan, September 20, 1945. I was a yeoman on a U.S. Navy vessel, the *Baham*, an old Liberty ship that had been converted into a repair ship. Our arrival in Tokyo Bay was noteworthy because, as we pulled in to the place we were to anchor in Yokosuka, the battleship *USS Missouri*, the ship on which the peace papers had been signed, was preparing to leave Japan on its homeward voyage to the United States. But I have already described my initial reactions to Japan in a piece titled "First Impressions" in my small volume *The Rainbow World*, and so I will not repeat what I have said there.

What my fellow countrymen and I saw in Japan was a nation flat on its face, its cities almost all reduced to rubble by repeated bombing raids. And there was talk among the Allies of keeping it that way in retaliation for its war crimes. China, by contrast, was one of the Allies, headed by a democratic regime and with a seemingly bright future. So, when my thoughts turned to post-war plans, it was in the direction of China. I would return to the United States, and with money assured by the government, study Chinese and then come back to these parts — this time the mainland — to pursue a degree in Chinese studies.

My second visit to Japan came in the fall of 1951, six years after the first arrival, six years that

changed the shape of things entirely. I had gone to Columbia in the fall of 1946, finished college in three years, and had spent two years in graduate school, emerging with a Master's degree in Chinese. Meanwhile, however, Mr. Mao had taken over in China and there was little possibility of going to that country to study Chinese. With only a MA, there seemed little chance of finding a job teaching Chinese in America. My best bet, it appeared, was to get a job in Japan — teaching English, presumably — and to carry on my study at a Japanese university. These plans were greatly helped by the fact that that year, 1950–1951, saw the first group of Government Aid and Relief in Occupied Areas (GARIOA) students from Japan at Columbia. I made friends with them, and one of them, Mr. Kurosu, proved to be extremely helpful in assisting me to make arrangements for my second expedition to Japan. Through him and others at Columbia, I received assurance of employment in Japan and even a promise of a place to live with a family in Kyoto. I took a ship to Japan and, with Mr. Kurosu's aid, arrived in Kyoto and took up residence with the Uemura family there.

This time was, of course, very different from my earlier encounter with Japan. This time I was really into Japanese life, eating Japanese food, sleeping on tatami mats, and living on a Japanese salary, all things that Professor Kaji predicted I could never do. (He was a Japanese professor visiting at Columbia who, when consulted, had thrown cold water on my plans to look for a job in the Tokyo area.)

In the spring of 1952, I received a request from Columbia to prepare a section of the book titled *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, the stipend for which allowed me to quit one of my jobs, that of a teacher of English. From now on, I had only my job as assistant to Professor Yoshikawa of Kyoto University, which was mainly concerned with works of Chinese literature and hence highly profitable to my studies.

After one year, I moved from the Uemuras' house to a small place of my own, sharing it with a Japanese friend, Shimada Noboru. There I wrote a dissertation on the *Shiji*, the monumental history of ancient China by Sima Qian. And in the summer of 1955 I returned to Columbia, submitted it the following year, and received my PhD.

In the fall of 1956, I went once again to Japan, this time on a Cutting Fellowship, to translate sections of the *Shiji* for Columbia. I should perhaps have gone to Taiwan instead to work on spoken

Chinese but went back to Kyoto because I was accustomed to life there and knew where to put my hands on the materials I would need.

By this time, Japan had long outgrown the period when it could claim to be a *bimbō no kuni* or a “poor country” and was awash with prosperity. Not only academic people like myself, but all types of Japan fans — tea people, pottery people, Zen people, poets — poured into the country, and Kyoto, in particular, was anxious to get its share of the experience. One of them, my friend Charles Terry from Columbia, who started as a student of Chinese history at Tokyo University but had shifted to work as a professional translator of Japanese works, was continually trying to lure me to Tokyo so I could help him in the translation business. I resisted, sure that a move to Tokyo would mean eventual sacrifice of my own translation interests to those of Charles’ plans. So, I stuck it out in Kyoto.

In 1966, after more trips to New York to teach at Columbia, I went back home for a period of extended teaching, 1966 to 1971. This was the time of the student riots at Columbia, a very dramatic period, and I’m glad I was there to experience it all. In the fall of 1971, I had my one and only sabbatical leave from Columbia, and I took a ship to Japan. Nixon floated the dollar, and so my stipend was greatly reduced in value in terms of the *yen* exchange. I lived in Wakayama, a town on the sea south of Osaka and had a wonderful time translating works I enjoyed, selections from the *Hanshu* and the poetry of Lu You. I also joined a zazen group at Kōshō-ji, a small temple in Wakayama. This was the beginning of my Zen training.

I had earlier had contact with Zen through my part-time job in Kyoto with Mrs. Sasaki’s First Zen Institute of America in Japan, run by an American woman who had married a Japanese named Sasaki. But Mrs. Sasaki’s approach and personality put me off the subject completely, and I never took any interest in the zazen activities there, though I would later regret that decision greatly.

At Kōshō-ji we gathered one afternoon a month, sat for three 25-minute sessions, listened to a tape recording of a *teishō* or lecture by Yamada Rōshi, the Zen master of a large temple in Kobe, and wound up in the main hall of the temple, reciting texts and bowing before the Buddha.

Later, I went with friends from the zazen group to a large Zen temple south of Wakayama, Kōkoku-ji, that had a *rōshi*, Meguro Zekkai. He said to come anytime, and so I did, joining a group that gathered there once a month and receiving a *kōan* from him. I passed it on the last visit I paid to the temple before departing for America. I think of the day I passed as one of the three happiest of my life,

the other two being the day in 1943 when I was admitted to the Navy and the day in 1956 when I got my PhD from Columbia. (I wish I could give an answer to a kōan to show readers how the system works, but of course all answers are supposed to be kept secret. There are a few Western writers on Zen who will give just one answer to show how it works, but then another writer will give the answer to just one kōan — another kōan — and so on, and before you know it the whole system is destroyed.)

I returned to Columbia for a year of teaching and then, according to previously arranged plans, asked for permission to withdraw from teaching. I was given a leave of absence and returned to Japan. There I had made arrangements to work for the Kokusai Kyōiku Jōhō Center, a semi-government agency, translating three large reference works on Japanese history, literature, and art respectively. This served to get me re-acquainted with the Japanese field and opened the way for later works of mine on Japanese literature.

I continued my Zen practice, going to Kōkoku-ji one weekend a month for meditation and kōan study. This is described in detail in my essay, “Rōhatsu Notes,” in *The Rainbow World*, and I will not repeat what I have said there.

In 1974, I began working for the Sōka Gakkai, translating some works by Ikeda Daisaku, the virtual head of the organization. I have never been a member of the Sōka Gakkai organization; our relations have been strictly business. But I have found them to be excellent to work for, wholly reasonable and fair, and we have had an extremely pleasant association, one that continues to the present. It has enabled me to work on translations of major works of the Buddhist tradition, beginning with the Chinese version of the *Lotus Sutra* and the writings of Nichiren, and has helped me to see that tradition in a varied and well-rounded fashion. And in the summer of 1988, the Sōka Gakkai people sent a Japanese friend and me from the Gakkai on a three-week trip to China, Japanese-speaking guides throughout, all expenses paid. It was in the post-Mao period, when things were just beginning to loosen up, so that this was a memorable event, particularly the visit to Xi’an (Chang’an). I asked about job possibilities there, but was told that the only openings would be as a teacher of English conversation. Too bad, I could never go back to that!

Beginning in 1977, I also began working two days a week as a copy writer for Standard Advertising, an advertising agency in Osaka. This was mainly to get me out of the house and into downtown Osaka. It was varied in nature, sometimes fun, sometimes dull, or worse, and I mostly

worked on short ads in English aired on car radios and similar items. But it had its bright moments, particularly after the working day was over when we went drinking, often at the customers' expense.

In October 1981, as I was preparing to go to Kōkoku-ji for my annual week of Zen practice, I got a phone call saying that Meguro Rōshi had had a stroke and was hospitalized — the end of Zen study with him. The following year, I started attending Sunday practice at Nagaoka Zenjuku in Nagaoka, a town near Kyoto. The sitting was fine, but the kōan study never went satisfactorily, and I gave up after about a year there.

In 1983, I resumed Zen study with Mr. Mamiya, the head of our group under Meguro Rōshi, a layman but fully qualified to continue Meguro Rōshi's teaching line. This continued at Sarōzan, a place in Osaka, and when that was torn down, at Chūō Shimin Center in Osaka until Mr. Mamiya terminated the group in 1996.

In the meantime, Japan was experiencing a strange era known as the “bubble period,” a time of unprecedented prosperity. People left the big cities, moved to the suburbs or even farther, went to Hawaii for weekends of golf, and retired to Spain to colonies of aged Japanese. Land prices soared; everyone was living high and looking down on America. I was alone in Moriguchi now, Noboru having died in the hospital in 1986 of complications from diabetes.

In January 1990, I went to Hong Kong at the invitation of the Translation Centre of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, staying in a fancy high rise and translating another volume of material from the *Shiji*. This, along with revised versions of the two earlier volumes, was published by Columbia and Hong Kong Press jointly. In July, I returned to Columbia for my last year of teaching there. Then I went to Japan once more, moving into a small house in Shijōnawate, a suburb of Osaka, and resuming my work for Sōka Gakkai. During the following years, I lived in Osaka, then Niigata, Nishinomiya (near Kobe), and finally in Tokyo. Meanwhile, the bubble had burst, and Japan was in a much more somber mood, financially depressed but back to its old self again. I joined a zazen group that met once a month at Kankō-ji in Tokyo. It is headed by Yoshida Shōdō, a Zen *rōshi* and head of one of the most famous temples in Kamakura, Kenchō-ji. He comes to Tokyo once a month to this temple, which was his old temple before he assumed his position in Kamakura. We meet at two in the afternoon, sit for two sessions, have a lecture, and perform devotions before the Buddha.

I am meanwhile working on various books on Bai Juyi, Santōka, Du Fu, etc. The years pass,

and I continue with Zen practice several times a month at Kankō-ji. The participants are all lay persons, mostly of advanced age. There is none of the tension and secretiveness associated with kōan study; no one marches off to an interview with the *rōshi* with a confident air, certain that he or she has the right answer, only to return a few minutes later looking punctured and confused. *Rōshi* in his lectures keeps assuring us that desire itself is not bad — it is when we try to cling to it that we get into trouble. And he usually manages to wind up his remarks with his favorite admonition, “And when the time comes to die, just die!” — as though we had any intention of doing otherwise!

And then, when we thought everything was going along peacefully, comes March 11, 2011, rattlety-BANG!! — the biggest earthquake ever to hit Japan! True, it did not directly affect the Tokyo area, only gave it a good shaking. But what it did to the coastal region of northeastern Japan is almost beyond description. However, the Japanese have had lots of experience with earthquakes and tsunamis in that area, and they have set about with admirable courage and determination to restore life to normal as soon as possible. What is different this time is the situation at the nuclear power plant in Fukushima, where the damage from the waves is of an uncertain nature, hard to assess because of the leakage of nuclear radiation, and difficult to control. How bad are things, and how long will it take to get them under control? These are the questions facing the nation, while foreigners flee the country and aftershocks of some considerable size continue to rock the area.

The prime minister has called it the greatest blow to the nation since the end of the Pacific War. One can see his point, though the two disasters are hardly comparable. The war was wholly human-made in nature, inspired and driven by errors of human calculation. Moreover, it affected the whole area of the country; almost all the major cities were left in ruins. This, by comparison, is a local event, albeit of horrendous scale, and wholly nature-driven. Preparation for it was poorly planned for, but no amount of preparation could have staved off the results.

What will its effects be upon the economy of the country as a whole? How long will we have to wait for a return to normal? These are questions we are left to ponder, while the lights of the cities are dimmed to conserve electricity, and the slow work of clearing the debris goes forward. *Ganbare!* we tell each other. Do your best, fight against the odds confronting us. But only time will tell how successful we may be.