

## Japanese Buddhism in the Letters of Kenneth Rexroth (1905–82)

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In *American Poetry and Japanese Culture* Professor Sanehide Kodama has convincingly argued that of all American poets Kenneth Rexroth had the greatest comprehension of Japanese culture. Even more than Ezra Pound, Rexroth "was the bridge between the prewar generation dreaming of the 'far away world of lotus' and the postwar generation seriously studying Zen Buddhism, Shinto religion, or Japanese and Chinese classics."<sup>1</sup> Countless readers of English have been introduced to the classical and modern poetry of Japan by means of Rexroth's masterful translations.<sup>2</sup> Insights into Japanese literature, art, history, and religion permeate his many erudite essays. The direct address of tanka and noh drama shaped the style of many of his poems and the dramatic verse tetralogy, *Beyond the Mountains*.<sup>3</sup> And his intimate experience of Japan from lecture-tours during 1967, 1972, 1974 – 75, 1978, and 1980 enters such innovative poetry as *The Heart's Garden*, *The Garden's Heart*,<sup>4</sup> *New Poems*,<sup>5</sup> and *The Morning Star*.<sup>6</sup> In Rexroth's unique world-view, as I have shown in *Revolutionary Rexroth: Poet of East-West Wisdom*.<sup>7</sup> Japanese and Buddhist themes became synthesized with Christian and other cultural traditions from the West.

From 1975 through 1979, Rexroth wrote sixty-one letters and cards to me concerning Japan, Buddhism, poetry, the counter-culture in America, and his own adventurous life. Together, supplementing his many books, these letters illuminate his diverse interests, our friendship, and the changing state of the world. Because many of his remarks focus on relations between Asia and the West, because the letters were sent from his homes in California and Japan, and because he was devoted to peace in consciousness and in the world, the

collection will be published as *Pacific Letters: Kenneth Rexroth to Morgan Gibson, 1957 - 79*.<sup>8</sup> From it, for this essay, I have made extracts of letters concerning the Buddhist tradition in Japan, which profoundly shaped Rexroth's work and which, through his poetry, translations, and essays, has influenced many readers and writers since World World II. My commentary may clarify some of his obscure references and indicate how his interpretation of Japanese Buddhism developed during the last years of his life, which comprised one of the most creative periods of his career. Brackets [ ] set off some of my notes.

Rexroth's first letter to me from Japan was dated 1 February 1975, when he was spending a year-long honeymoon there with his fourth wife, the poet Carol Tinker. During much of that year they resided in the Higashiyama district of Kyoto. In a large farmhouse that they had rented, as had Donald Keene and other Japanologists before them, eight-hundred year old beams supported the roof above a sunken kitchen and tea-ceremony room in which hung ancient calligraphies. In early 1975 I had asked Rexroth many questions about Japanese Buddhism in a letter written from Vermont, where I was then chairperson of the Goddard College graduate program. I had wanted to know whether Buddhism might offer a spiritual and philosophical alternative to the alienating pressures of western civilization. Rexroth replied:

That's quite a letter! I have quoted it to Japanese & Indian (I just was at an "East-West" discussion in Bombay) intellectuals and it amazes them - to whom [the subject of] Buddhism, Hinduism, much less Tantrism is anathema, and represents only the blackest reaction and commercialism. In Japan, some of the youngest, influenced by Snyder, have taken up their own, or Gary's "Buddhism," which is as much a recent construct as Suzuki's (or Buber's "Zen Judaism") and a kind of Neo-Tantrism is popular among a very few intellectuals in India, mostly artists. Most Japanese are totally ignorant of the very existence of philosophical Buddhism or have ever read the Lotus, or ever heard of the Lankavatara or

the Avatamsaka - or know the difference between a Buddha & a Bodhisattva. "Nehan" (Nirvana) they think means "Buddha's Death Bed."

Rexroth did not, therefore, look to the current practice of Buddhism in Japan for compassionate wisdom, but rather to its religious, philosophical, artistic and especially literary expressions in ancient times, for a source of cultural renewal. Long before going to Japan he had read the Lotus Sutra in Chinese, the Lankavatara and Avatamsaka Sutras. probably in English, and many other Buddhist writings in English and Japanese. Like the younger American poet Gary Snyder, the Japanese philosopher Daisetz Suzuki, the expatriate Lafcadio Hearn, and other intellectuals dissatisfied with the materialism, the techno-logical chaos, and the alienation of western civilization, Rexroth re-shaped the Buddhist tradition in his writings. He had no illusions about how remote this tradition of compassionate wisdom was from daily life in modern Japan. On 1 June 1975, after learning that I would be teaching at Osaka University, he warned me:

Let's hope you won't be too disillusioned with Japan. You have to accept a thoroly modern country - more in many ways than the USA, with odd & stray bits of the past - *and* with underlying little changed traditions. Buddhism's for burials, Shinto for weddings- both thoroly commercial & as bankrupting as bar-mitzvahs [the Jewish ceremony for boys]. You have to search for the real thing.

On 11 July 1975 he complained again about modern Japan:

No, you don't realize how remote traditional Japan is to most people - and how many people actively hate it . . . Almost all Buddhist temples are associations of combined undertakers & custodians of national monuments & collect money for every time you turn around. Buddhist laymen are simply grossly superstitious. Only an infinitesimal group of scholars have an intelligent understanding of their religion - due to influence of the West.

Tantric Buddhism is illegal - very - but can be found in a few village temple monasteries - *but* they are certainly not going to admit it to you. The best place to find the kind of Shingon guru you seek is at Sōjō-in Koyasan. Don't go to board at other temples - they are just poor hotels.

And on 31 July 1975 he sarcastically wrote that "A Japanese would be as likely to seek philosophy from a Buddhist monk as you would from a 'mortician'."

Rexroth's remaining letters were sent from his home in Santa Barbara, California, to me in Toyonaka, where I lived near Osaka University from September 1975 until April 1979. After I had written him about my experiences in certain Zen and Shingon temples, he responded on 10 April 1976 with some of his most penetrating comments about Japanese Buddhism:

My My - you are certainly becoming more Buddhist than the Japanese. Yes, you are right - wherever it is vital in Japan Buddhism is moving beyond sectarianism to a "synthetic Buddhism" which is very like Hinayana as imagined by the Rhys Davids [scholars of Sri Lankan Theravada Buddhism]. Curiously - it is Jōdo Shinshū which leads in this - and which is the only congregational religion. The vast pantheon of Shingon - or of lamaism & Tantrism generally - simply represents stages of personal interior experience - stages of illumination. Which is what is meant by "becoming" the bodhisattva or buddha in the mandala. No - I am not focusing on Hearn. I just had a job to edit his essays on Buddhism . . .

His edition of *The Buddhist Writings of Lafcadio Hearn*, with his introduction, was published in Santa Barbara by Ross-Erikson in 1977. Like Hearn, Rexroth found the mythology of Buddhism, especially the Buddhas arrayed in Shingon mandala and sculpture, of immense psychological and spiritual value. In fact, his personal contemplation of such images was indispensable for writing much of

his later poetry.

On the other hand, often complaining about the indifference to rigorous, analytical, philosophical thinking in Japan generally, Rexroth wrote on 12 June 1977:

Japanese consider the discussion of "deep" subjects bad manners, haven't you found that out? Nobody takes Western philosophy seriously ("Dekahe" for Descartes, Kant, Hegel) except professors paid to teach it. Modern Japanese philosophy is elementary, as speculative profound insight Kobo Daishi is childish and commonplace.

Though Rexroth had reservations about the abstract, analytical thought of Kōbō Daishi (Kūkai), he often praised his philosophical poetry and urged my friend Hiroshi Murakami and myself to produce the English version of "Juyu o Eizuru Shi" ("Poems that Sing Ten Images") which was eventually published by Mahāchulalonghorn University in Bangkok.<sup>9</sup> Rexroth also incorporated much Shingon mythology, especially allusions to Dainichi Nyorai and Indra's Net, into his original poetry, from World War II, when he had written his second long poem, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*,<sup>10</sup> until his last years, when he wrote *The Morning Star*, his final full book of original poems, in Japan. But though he gleaned much wisdom from Shingon, and appreciated some aspects of Jōdo Shinshū, he had little use for Zen (excepting the genius of Daisetz Suzuki, whom he admired). He blasted Zen, which has had a major influence on American poetry and cultural life generally, in his letter of 10 February 1978:

Zen is the religion of the military caste, the great rich - e. g. the Nomura brothers are all Zen monks, Ruth Sasaki was a foolish Chicago millionairess - the so-called Black Dragons, and gaijin hippies. Actually, there is going on in Japan a sudden revival of Theravada Buddhism, for centuries known only to scholars, and this is attracting youth interested in religion. It was his Zenism that got Snyder . . . boycotted by Japanese poets until he formed

his own "movement" - the harijan . . . Shinshu has become a sort of "synthetic Buddhism" with strong emphasis on Shaka [Shakyamuni]. I prefer Koyasan. There are  $\infty^\infty$ , infinity to the power of infinity, Buddha worlds. See you soon.

In this passage he unfairly condemns the Zen sect and certain of its followers without focussing on Zen itself, which he might have appreciated as pure contemplation. However, his contemplative practice was focussed on images and ideas, rather than on emptiness (空) or nothingness (無). Unfortunately, Rexroth seemed unfamiliar with the work of such Zen philosophers of the Kyoto School as Nishida, Hisamatsu, Nishitani, and Abe, whose thinking resembles his own in certain respects, and whose work might have softened his attitude towards Zen as contemplation, if not as a sect.

When Rexroth and his wife came to Osaka a few weeks later, during the spring of 1978, they stayed with me while we gave poetry readings and lectures at American Centers in Osaka and Sapporo. During this visit, he was the happiest that I had ever known him to be, telling jokes and anecdotes of his adventurous life, talking endlessly about Japan, and singing songs late into the night. He confided in me, with tears welling up in his eyes, that he wanted to die in Japan, but he nevertheless had to return to America.

Rexroth wrote his last letter to me on 15 March 1979, interpreting Buddhist themes in his poetry in response to a draft of my essay, "Rexroth's Dharma," which I had sent him and which eventually appeared in *For Rexroth*, a *Festschrift* edited by Geoffrey Gardner.<sup>11</sup> In Rexroth's letter is a remarkably succinct, enigmatic statement of his visionary, holistic, organic philosophy. He alludes to three of his most important works: *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, the long poem in which Christian and Buddhist images fuse in a vision of salvation from personal and historical violence; *The Love Poems of Marichiko*, in which a modern Japanese woman, identified with the erotic energy of Tantra, ecstatically unites with a lover mysteriously identified with Dainichi Nyorai<sup>12</sup>; and *Beyond the Mountains*, his plays about the search for spiritual realization during the collapse of Greek civilization.

Dear Morgan & Keiko . . . Thank you for the essay. The long poems are all visionary and have much the same philosophy. The Phoenix and the Tortoise was written during the Pacific War and is strung on the Hyakunin Isshu - ending with the same illumination. It is wrong to call Dainichi Nyorai the Great Sun Buddha - true - that is literal - but he is the Unlimited Illumination. Marichiten is not a "sex goddess"-but the first light of dawn, *Myojo* the morning star, which is why the calligraphy on the cover [of *The Morning Star*]. It was also the name of Yosano Akiko's magazine. Marichiko constantly makes comparisons of herself & lover and Marishi-ten & Dainichi. The poem "breaks" at the moments of hubris, watching the fiery 大 from the Kamogawa Bridge and at the Shizuka Gozen poem, where she realizes that illumination has been corrupted by *hubris*. It is the same plot as my plays - - except *Iphigenia* [in *Beyond the Mountains*]. I hope you've finished the Kūkai poems. There is a priest at Sōjō-in in Kōyasan, who could have given you advice. Lots of love to you both. Kenneth  
 Of course your friends are welcome.

In the Tantric "illumination" at the conclusion of *The Phoenix and the Tortoise* he envisions his second wife Marie, singing as she emerges nude from the sea into the sunshine of Dainichi Nyorai.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the light of this universal Buddha is augered by the Morning Star, the dominant image of his final book. This image had attracted his attention not only in Buddhist literature, but also in the title of the journal of the new Japanese romanticism, *Myojo*, founded by his favorite woman poet of modern Japan, Yosano Akiko, and her husband Tekkan. I have argued elsewhere that Yosano Akiko was a model for Rexroth's Marichiko, the subject of his most passionate love poems, written from a woman's point of view.<sup>14</sup> The "Shizuka Gozen poem," numbered XLV in the *Marichiko* sequence, reveals the illusory nature of love, of art, of life itself - - the Buddhist samsara which is inseparable from nirvana. Marichiko's "hubris" (the Greek term which Rexroth surprisingly applied to a Japanese subject) was her pride in believing that ecstasy is eternal, her blindness to the inevitability of

suffering, loss, and death in the creative process of the universe. Here Rexroth offers one of his most profound insights, suggesting that Marichiko is closer to enlightenment after losing her lover, when she reflects:

When in the Noh theater  
 We watched Shizuka Gozen  
 Trapped in the snow,  
 I enjoyed the tragedy,  
 For I thought,  
 Nothing like this  
 Will ever happen to me.<sup>15</sup>

#### Notes

- (1) (Hamden, Connecticut: An Archon Book, The Shoe String Press, 1985), page 122. See also my review in *Comparative Literature Studies* XXIII, 1 (Spring, 1986): 85 – 90.
- (2) *One Hundred Poems from the Japanese* (New York: New Directions, 1955), *One Hundred More Poems from the Japanese* (New York: New Directions, 1974), *The Burning Heart: Women Poets of Japan* (with Ikuko Atsumi, New York: A Continuum Book, Seabury Press, 1977), and *Seasons of Sacred Lust: Selected Poems of Kazuko Shiraishi* (with Carol Tinker, Ikuko Atsumi, John Solt, and Yasuyo Morita, New York: New Directions, 1978).
- (3) (New York: New Directions, 1951).
- (4) *The Collected Longer Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1968), pages 281 – 303.
- (5) This volume, published in New York by New Directions in 1974, includes the previously published *Sky Sea Birds Trees Earth House Beasts Flowers*.
- (6) (New York: New Directions, 1979). *The Morning Star* contains three previously published collections: *The Silver Swan*, *On Flower Wreath Hill*, and *The Love Poems of Marichiko*.
- (7) (Hamden, Connecticut: an Archon Book, The Shoe String Press, 1986).
- (8) Edited, with Commentary, by Morgan Gibson. (Buffalo, New York: White Pine Press, forthcoming).
- (9) *Tantric Poetry of Kūkai (Kōbō Daishi) Japan's Buddhist Saint* (Bangkok, Thailand: Mahachulalonghorn Buddhist University, 1982). With Excerpts

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from *The Mahāvairocana Sutra* and I-Hsing's *Commentary*. Reissued:  
(Buffalo, New York: White Pine Press, 1987).

- (10) The poem was first published in a book with the same title by New Directions in 1944 and was included also in *The Collected Longer Poems*, pages 61 – 92.
- (11) (New York: *The Ark* # 14, 1980), pp. 27 – 37
- (12) *The Morning Star*, pages 47 – 82.
- (13) *The Collected Longer Poems*, page 91.
- (14) *Revolutionary Rexroth: Poet of East-West Wisdom*, pages 83 – 84.
- (15) *The Morning Star*, page 75.

### Bibliography

Newcomers to Rexroth's work can best begin reading his *Selected Poems* (1984), *Classics Revisited* (1986), and *Selected Essays* (1987), all edited by Bradford Morrow and published in New York by New Directions; *Beyond the Mountains* (New York: New Directions, 1951), a dramatic tetralogy; *An Autobiographical Novel* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1978); and other volumes of his prose, poetry, and translations published by New Directions and small presses.

Japanese translations of Rexroth's poetry include:

ケネス・レクスロス 摩利支子の愛の歌 片桐ユズルによる復元のこころみ  
[The Love Poems of Marichiko, translated by Kenneth Rexroth -- an Attempt at Restoration by Yuzuru Katagiri] (Kyoto: Kawaraban, 1978. The poems are actually not translations by Rexroth, as he had indicated, but his original work, herein translated into Japanese by Katagiri.)

ケネス・レクスロス 花環の丘にて その他の日本で書かれた詩 1974 – 75  
片桐ユズル訳 [Kenneth Rexroth, On Flower Wreath Hill and other Poems Written in Japan, 1974 – 75, Translated by Yuzuru Katagiri]. Including *The Silver Swan*. (Kyoto: Kawaraban, Kyoto Seika Tankidaigaku, 1979).

ケネス・レクスロス 心の庭・花環の丘にて その他日本の詩 片桐ユズル訳  
[Kenneth Rexroth, The Heart's Garden, On Flower Wreath Hill, and Other Poetry of Japan, translated by Yuzuru Katagiri]. (Okayama: Techosha, 1984). The volume includes my "Comment," translated by Katagiri as "Kaisetsu," pp. 96 – 102.

Books on Rexroth in English are  
my *Revolutionary Rexroth: Poet of East-West Wisdom* (Hamden, Connecticut: an Archon Book, The Shoe String Press, 1986), with notes and bibliography of all available items to date from Japan, Europe and the United States;  
my *Kenneth Rexroth* (New York and Boston: Twayne/G. K. Hall, United States Authors Series # 208, 1972); material from this first book on Rexroth, now out

of print, has been included in the more comprehensive 1986 study; Geoffrey Gardner, editor, *For Rexroth (Festschrift)*, New York: *The Ark* 19, 1980).

Major publications on Rexroth in Japan are

Yuzuru Katagiri, ed. *Kenneth Rexroth 1905 – 82* (Kyoto: Rexroth Poetry Award Committee, Kyoto Seika College, 1982). Memorials in poetry and prose, mostly in Japanese.

Rebecca Jennison, Yuzuru Katagiri, and Edith Shiffert, editors, *Kyoto Review* 15 (Kyoto, Japan, Fall, 1982). Rexroth Memorial Issue. Prose by Snyder, Kodama, and M. Gibson; poetry by Akiyama, Solt, Shiraishi, Shiffert, Antler, Hunt, and Katagiri; all in English; with photographs.

星座 *Kenneth Rexroth* (Tokyo: Takeo Yatate, Fall, 1982). Rexroth Memorial Issue (in Japanese). Prose by Kodama, Kaneseiki, Nakayama, Yaguchi, Katagiri, Snyder, and M. Gibson (translated by Keiko Matsui Gibson).