

## Lecture 18: Intro to Literature & the Environment, *Buddhism, Cultural Implications*

### Japan and Buddhism

Buddhism entered Japan almost 1500 years ago. Prior to its arrival, the Shinto religion flourished in Japan.

Shinto is arguably a largely earth-based religion, as it has a range of deities, kami, venerated in a vast web of shrines across Japan. As these kami are often associated with particular places, they can be seen as a type of genius loci.

Buddhism did not displace Shintoism in Japan. As roughly 2/3 of all Japanese people today consider themselves adherents of Buddhism, and another 2/3 adherents of Shinto, there is significant overlap of these two religions, which co-exist quite well.

In area, the United States is over 25 times larger than the islands of Japan. However, the U.S. population is only about 2.5 times larger. Hence, all things being equal, the population density of Japan is 10 times greater than the U.S.

This density of population, coupled with the fact that Japan was largely closed to the rest of world from the middle of the 17th to the middle of the 19th centuries, meant that resources were, relatively speaking, in short supply. Consequently, they needed to be treated sparingly.

Buddhism helped provide an ideological reassessment of natural resources and the relationship that the Japanese people had to them. The result was a culture that used less, reused more, and venerated decaying and natural objects.

### Wabi-sabi

Almost since its inception as a distinct aesthetic mode, wabi-sabi has been peripherally associated with Zen Buddhism. In many ways, wabi-sabi could even be called the "Zen of things," as it exemplifies many of Zen's core spiritual-philosophical tenants. The first Japanese people involved with wabi-sabi - tea masters, priests, and monks - had all practiced Zen and were steeped in the Zen mindset.

Leonard Koren

Originally, the Japanese words "wabi" and "sabi" had quite different meanings. "Sabi" originally meant "chill," "lean," or "withered." "Wabi" originally meant the misery of living alone in nature, away from society, and suggested a discouraged, dispirited, cheerless emotional state. Around the 14th century, the meanings of both words began to evolve in the direction of more positive aesthetic values. The

self-imposed isolation and involuntary poverty of the hermit and ascetic came to be considered opportunities for spiritual richness. For the poetically inclined, this kind of life fostered an appreciation of the minor details of every day life and insights into the beauty of the inconspicuous and often overlooked aspects of nature. In turn, unprepossessing simplicity took on new meaning as the basis for a new, pure beauty.

Leonard Koren

The term wabi sabi suggests such qualities as impermanence, humility, asymmetry, and imperfection. These underlying principles are diametrically opposed to those of their Western counterparts, whose values are rooted in a Hellenic worldview that values permanence, grandeur, symmetry, and perfection. Japanese art, infused with the spirit of wabi sabi, seeks beauty in the truths of the natural world, looking toward nature for its inspiration. It refrains from all forms of intellectual entanglement, self-regard, and affectation in order to discover the unadorned truth of nature. Since nature can be defined by its asymmetry and random imperfections, wabi sabi seeks the purity of natural imperfection.

Andrew Juniper

The Zen [Buddhist] temples in Japan led the way for Japan's arts...[In]...focusing on the natural, the impermanent, and the humble, and in these simple and often rustic objects they discovered the innate beauty to be found in the exquisite random patterns left by the flow of nature. The small nuances of color, the curve of an opening petal, the crack in a bamboo vase, or the decay of a knot in old timber all came to symbolize mujo, which is the Buddhist tenet of impermanence and continuous flux. As the physical manifestations of mujo, these simple objects then became vehicles for aesthetic contemplation. Wabi sabi became the term associated with this quality, and as such mujo forms a defining aspect of wabi sabi objects. If an object or expression can bring about, within us, a sense of serene melancholy and a spiritual longing, then that object could be said to be wabi sabi. Realizing this, the Zen monks then strove to produce objects and environments that used these characteristics to elevate one's state of mind.

Andrew Juniper

The foundations for wabi sabi art forms, like the tea ceremony and flower arranging, were laid in the Muromachi period by exponents such as Sen no Rikyu (1522–1591), and it was these early innovations that provided the artistic momentum for the ensuing centuries...

Sen no Rikyu...spent many years as a Zen monk in the temple of Daitokuji in Kyoto, and it was this training that was to inspire his creative work through the rest of his long life. When Rikyu took up his position as tea master to Toyotomi Hideyoshi, he took the ceremony to a new level of refinement...

By the time of his death he had realigned the tea ceremony as a pure and simple ceremony to be enjoyed by one and all...The story has it that one day as he was

walking through town, Sen no Rikyu saw a rustic roof tile whose rough texture and subtle nuance of color caught his imagination. He asked the roof tile maker, Chojiro, to produce, in the same fashion, some utensils for use in his tea ceremony. This adoption of rustic utensils had also been advocated by Ikkyu, but with Rikyu's influence in matters of taste, the relatively small shift in utensils heralded a monumental shift in the philosophy of tea. Instead of the mind being drawn toward materiality, it was being encouraged away from it, toward introspection and a contemplation of the evanescence of life.

Andrew Juniper

With the great haiku poet Matsuo Basho (1644–1684), the term *sabi* was employed as an aesthetic juxtaposition to the essence of life and threw into focus the impermanence of our situation and the folly of trying to deny this unmovable truth. The beauty of Basho's prose, however, took the negative aspects of old age, loneliness, and death and imbued them with a serene sense of beauty.

Andrew Juniper

Andrew Juniper is cited from *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence* (Tuttle Publishing, 2003).

Leonard Koren is quoted from *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* (Imperfect Publishing, 2008)

## Mitate

"In Japanese, we talk about the concept of *mitate*—seeing a certain item not in its originally intended form but as another thing; seeing something as resembling something else and putting it to use in another way."

Shunmyo Masuno

"The notion of *mitate* originates in the aesthetics of the tea ceremony, in which practitioners put everyday objects to use in elevated forms—for example, a gourd that was originally a water flask being used as a flower vase. Utensils age after years of use. An item's utility becomes obsolete. But that does not necessarily mean the end of its life. You can discover a different use for it and breathe new life into the object itself."

Shunmyo Masuno

*Mitate* "is at the heart of Zen. Take, for instance, a millstone. Over years of use, it becomes abraded and grains can no longer be ground on it. But this does not mean the end of its life. It could be set out in the garden, perhaps used as a stepping-stone. Or a teacup that has a chipped rim might now be used as a bud vase."

Shunmyo Masuno

"Objects do not have merely one purpose. They can be used in myriad ways, depending upon the user's imagination. How will you use an object? That is the aesthetic concept of mitate. There is abundance not in the accumulation of things, but in knowing how to use things well. Try seeing things in different ways, so as not to be bound by just 'the proper way.'"

Shunmyo Masuno

Shunmyo Masuno is cited from *The Art of Simple Living* (Penguin Books, 2019),

## Kintsugi

"Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer dusted or mixed with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. This act of embracing the flawed or imperfect is also a Zen Buddhist philosophy, a golden alchemy that transforms the object into something new, more rare and beautiful than before by having had its story heard."

Karen Loomis

"Kintsugi", also called "kintsukuroi", means "golden seams" or "golden repair". It is a traditional Japanese art form and "wabi-sabi" (the act of embracing the flawed or imperfect) technique of mending broken pottery which uses lacquer and gold or other precious metals to emphasize rather than hide the breaks. This technique often references natural forms such as landscapes, trees, waterfalls and rivers.

Karen Loomis

"The careful repair of these broken pots symbolizes and implies a reconciliation with what is broken, imperfect and scarred. There is no attempt to disguise the damage, but to make the fault lines beautiful and strong."

Karen Loomis

## Clothing

Perhaps not surprisingly, the perception of clothing in traditional Japan was fundamentally different from the commonplace contemporary view in the West. This is especially clear when we consider how clothing that is showing signs of wear was viewed in traditional Japan compared to contemporary America.

In order to consider the Western perception of clothing that is "worn out", let's consider the example of the business suit, which has been evolving since at least as early as the 17th century. Here are examples from the 17th, 18th, 19th, and 21st centuries:

The modern suit in England arguably began emerging in the 17th century. At that time, it was worn by royalty and the royal court.

However, as the middle class began to grow, they too wanted the trappings of wealth and power. Hence, merchants and others who made their livings in business, inspired by court dress, began to emulate such fashion, which resulted in the "business suit."

While suits are a good example of fashion as signs of wealth, it applied to nearly all of the garments worn by the rich and powerful.

Hence, walking down a street, a person's wealth and social position would have been immediately signaled not just by the cost of their clothing, but also by it being free of any signs of wear, which would have indicated that something was wrong - that you were not in fact as wealthy as your clothes represented.

While such affectations of wealth and power through perfectly maintained clothing began with royalty and then moved to a wealthy merchant (business) class, over time it migrated to more and more people.

For example, pristine clothing became a sign that one was not a member of the working class. Not only did a distinction arise between "white collar" and "blue collar" workers based on the style of clothing worn, white collar clothing had to be impeccably maintained while blue collar garments were expected to be patched and worn.

Clothing has long served as symbols of wealth and power.

For a piece of clothing to most effectively serve this symbolic function, it had to be impeccably made, worn, and maintained. If it in any way looked shabby, it risked diminishing the credibility and symbolic power of the wearer.

Thus, a small stain or tear, if not repairable, meant that an entire business suit needed to be discarded. Since suits have traditionally been comprised of two or three matched pieces made of fabric with a high thread count, successful reweaving of even a small tear was often impossible, resulting in the discarding of all the suit's pieces. Being able to afford to do so was another sign of wealth.

In short, in the past 400 years a range of socioeconomic factors have consolidated an aesthetic (i.e. a standard of beauty) that fetishes the new and pristine as it simultaneously deprecates anything that appears worn. Although this largely begins with fashions of clothing, this aesthetic now dictates fashion in many, many industries.

Aware of the dangers of this aesthetic, in 1854 Henry David Thoreau warned in *Walden* that we should "beware of all enterprises that require new clothes."

This aesthetic, which celebrates the new and pristine, results in us discarding objects long before they cease to perform their function.

It is thus an environmentally disastrous aesthetic, as it encourages us to (in fact, in many ways demands that we) produce and use two or three times as many, or even

more, objects as we need - dramatically increasing our climate footprint in the process.

Because nearly all of us are born into a world dominated by this aesthetic, it seems natural and right, in spite of its horrific environmental consequences.

Conversely, challenges to this aesthetic, through, for example, the wearing of a stained and tattered business suit, will likely seem odd or perhaps suggest that there is something disturbing or worrisome about the wearer.

All this raises an intriguing (and important) question: what would an aesthetic that eschewed the new and pristine, instead favoring and celebrating the worn and fading, be like?

As we have seen, Buddhist-inspired wabi sabi, which is in many ways Japan's defining aesthetic, offers a counter to the traditional Western aesthetic. Perhaps not surprisingly, this includes not only things like pottery, but clothing as well. This will be the subject of the next section.

## Boro

Recall that the “term wabi sabi suggests such qualities as impermanence, humility, asymmetry, and imperfection...[and that these]...underlying principles are diametrically opposed to those of their Western counterparts, whose values are rooted in a Hellenic worldview that values permanence, grandeur, symmetry, and perfection.” (From Andrew Juniper’s *Wabi Sabi: The Japanese Art of Impermanence*.)

In the previous section, we saw what a Western aesthetic that values “permanence, grandeur, symmetry, and perfection” can look like with respect to fashion. In this section, we will consider what a Buddhist inspired, traditional Japanese wabi sabi aesthetic, which values “impermanence, humility, asymmetry, and imperfection,” looks like.

In order to do so, we will first consider boro.

Boro “translates to “rags” but has...become synonymous with the patched, stitched, and mended garments of Aomori Prefecture in Northern Japan. The history of Boro is rich and complex. It evolved from the necessity to preserve the smallest scrap of fabric, add strength and warmth through patching, and use fibers like hemp and later cotton to withstand wide-ranging weather conditions, including very cold winters. The Boro garments were mended with basic and utilitarian Sashiko stitches...[T]he stitches were primarily meant to repair and patch garments while adding warmth, not solely to serve as decoration or embellishment.

Katrina Rodabaugh

Boro employs a “minimalist approach of single color of thread on single color of fabric and the high impact of line, shape, scale, and size with white stitches on blue

garments and gorgeous patchwork. The simple act of adding a few printed blue patches or varying from blue to white thread creates endless possibilities. There's a magnificent visceral beauty in original Boro garments that tells a fascinating and complex story of the intersection of design, textiles, agriculture, economics, and the potential for striking aesthetics in artful invention."

Katrina Rodabaugh

Cited from *Mending Matters* (Abrams Books, 2018)

## Sakiori

"The Japanese word sakiori comes from "saki," which means to tear or rip up, and "ori," which means weave. "Saki" relates to preparing the fabric by striping it into pieces and "ori" refers to weaving it together..."

"Recycling such old fabric remnants into sakiori weavings follows the Japanese indispensable concept of "mottainai" or not wasting precious cloth when one can prolong the fabric's useful life through recycling and reuse..."

<https://www.kimonoboy.com/sakiori.html>

"Japanese weavers of sakiori faced something very different. Their use of rags in weaving emerged from an absolute lack of any other fibers beyond rough bast. As a result, their uses for the rag-woven cloth were more ubiquitous and creative. Their goal was not to frugally 'use it up and wear it out' but to make a new cloth that retained all the desirable characteristics of the old."

"Two approaches to rag weaving—one rooted in frugality, one in necessity—and together, a perfect approach to the historically unprecedented textile economy in which we now live. New textiles are abundant and cheap, but also wasteful, polluting, and sometimes accompanied by human rights abuses of textile workers."

Quoted from *Weaving Western Sakiori: A Modern Guide for Rag Weaving* by Amanda Robinette (Stackpole Books, 2018).

Sakiori fabric being woven on a loom and two garments made of sakiori:

## Sashiko

Sashiko (Japanese: literally "little stabs" or "little pierce") is a form of decorative reinforcement stitching (or functional embroidery) from Japan that started out of practical need during the Edo era (1615-1868). Traditionally used to reinforce points of wear or to repair worn places or tears with patches, making the piece ultimately stronger and warmer, this running stitch technique is often used for purely decorative purposes in quilting and embroidery. The white cotton thread on the traditional indigo blue cloth (said to recall snow falling around old farmhouses) gives sashiko its distinctive appearance, though decorative items sometimes use red thread.

"Sashiko" Wikipedia

## Mottainai

In many ways, the Buddhist inspired Japanese attitude expressed here is best expressed by the term mottainai.

Mottainai can be simply translated as 'wasteful,' though it often carries emotional import, as in "what a waste!"

It has been argued that the term "dates back to at least the thirteenth century" and that "mottainai [is] inseparable from Buddhist ideas about the transience and evanescence of life."

Cited from "Affluence of the Heart": Wastefulness and the Search for Meaning in Millennial Japan, Eiko Maruko Siniawer (The Journal of Asian Studies, Volume 73, Issue 1, February 2014)

"We often hear in Japan the expression mottainai, which loosely means 'wasteful' but in its full sense conveys a feeling of awe and appreciation for the gifts of nature or the sincere conduct of other people. There is a trait among Japanese people to try to use something for its entire effective life or continue to use it by repairing it. In this caring culture, people will endeavor to find new homes for possessions they no longer need. The mottainai principle extends to the dinner table, where many consider it rude to leave even a single grain of rice in the bowl."

Hitoshi Chiba, "Restyling Japan: Revival of the "Mottainai" Spirit". Look Japan, November 2002.

"In the postwar period, mottainai became a convenient, one-word encapsulation of concerns about resource scarcity, food security, the proliferation of garbage, and a throw-away culture, and the term was used to push back against the perceived prevalence of consumerism, materialism, and environmental degradation."

Cited from "Affluence of the Heart": Wastefulness and the Search for Meaning in Millennial Japan, Eiko Maruko Siniawer (The Journal of Asian Studies, Volume 73, Issue 1, February 2014)

At the 2009 United Nations Summit on Climate Change, Kenyan environmentalist Wangari Maathai noted that, "Even at personal level, we can all reduce, re-use and recycle, what is embraced as Mottainai in Japan, a concept that also calls us to express gratitude, to respect and to avoid wastage."

Mottainai, Wikipedia