

The Journey Itself Home
Saigyo's Way of Impermanence

Andrew Meyer, College '07
University of Pennsylvania

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Undergraduate Humanities Forum Mellon Research Fellow

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The journey is for us and was for Saigyō an impermanent condition of movement, but aside from this essential similarity, our conventional conception and Saigyō's diverge. Whereas we embark on a journey to get to a destination, ultimately returning to our home, Saigyō transcends all such structures and anchors by dwelling permanently in the condition of the journey. That is, the journey itself is home for him. It would be easy to argue that he is no more than nature poet, drawn into a lifestyle of traveling because of its privileged connection with the natural. This stance has been argued in the past, and convincingly grounded in the strong value of nature in Japanese literary tradition. However, framing him this way overlooks the deep spiritual beliefs and unique cultural influences that inspire his work and push him to along his wandering way. In this essay I seek to understand the connections between Saigyō's fundamental spiritual beliefs and poetry, while focusing on how and why a wandering lifestyle is integral to his life and work. I believe he expresses through his poetry and wandering lifestyle the realization and acceptance of what he feels to be the absolute truth and beauty of impermanence, as symbolically and actually present in nature.

My analysis will progress chronologically, beginning with Saigyō. I will first seek to contextualize Saigyō's life and work within the social and cultural traditions of which he is partly a product and partly a creator. After sketching his context I will explore and analyze his work, as informed by the Buddhist ideas and aesthetic paradigms of his time. My essential purpose throughout will be to argue that his poetry and wandering lifestyle express a particular conception of the Absolute or the sacred, namely

that Nature is the symbolic and actual locus of spiritual value, which he experientially realizes and embraces by harmonizing with the eternal way of impermanence through the religious practice of wandering.

Early Life in the “World of Man”

Saigyō is known primarily through the hundreds of *waka* verses he composed during his life from 1118-1190. *Waka*, also known as *Tanka*, is a traditional Japanese poetic form with the structure of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables, which in later times would evolve into the even more simple *haiku*. Though little is known about his life beyond the mythology that came to shroud his name, his influence in the tradition of court poetry is undeniable. Saigyō has more contributions than any other poet in the renowned anthology *Shinkokinshū*, and more than fifteen hundred poems remain from his personal collection the *Sankashū*, or “Mountain Home Collection.”ⁱ Though he never explains why exactly he chose to become a wandering Buddhist monk-poet, I will try to discover his motives through the information we have of his early years in the secular world and his later poetry.

Saigyō lived in the final years of the Heian Period of late medieval Japan. Heian translates to “peace” or “tranquility” in English, and is considered one of the most stable and culturally rich periods in Japanese history. The physical center and namesake of the Heian imperial court was the city of Heian-kyō, modern day Kyoto. From the end of the Nara period in 794, Heian-kyō was the center of political power and cultural creation. During these years of stability and peace, Heian-kyō came to be known as the “Eternal City,” for its seeming permanence and unified power, especially relative to the

heterogeneous and turbulent power schemes of Japan's history.ⁱⁱ However, the Japanese civilization of Saigyō's historical moment was defined by bloody transition and widespread strife, as the seemingly permanent political structure of Heian government slipped into total collapse.

By the twelfth century, the Heian court had developed a political system known as *insei*, or "government while retired." The nobles of the ruling Fujiwara clan, which had been in power since the beginning of the Heian period, would enthrone a young member of the clan, and subsequently force his resignation within years to make room for a new young figurehead. This system facilitated effective control by a small group of elite Fujiwara through the puppet figure of an emperor too young to be autonomous or question the structures of power. These retired emperors would withdraw themselves from the political spotlight, ostensibly becoming tonsured as royal Buddhist monks living in secluded cloisters. However these former emperors, from behind the façade of religious commitment, were actually deeply integrated into the secular political concerns of the Heian regime, and the Buddhist cloisters were effectively the locus of political power.ⁱⁱⁱ By giving up the appearance of power, they in fact gained real power.

Saigyō, born with the secular name Norikiyo, was born into this system and participated in it. Norikiyo was a member of the Sato (sp) branch of the powerful Fujiwara clan. The Sato branch was by tradition a military house, whose function was to protect the members of the clan and ensure its hold on power. Consequently, the young Norikiyo was raised to be a warrior, and embraced this path, at least for some time. After a childhood of training, the teenage Norikiyo served in the retirement palaces of emperors

Toba and Sutoku as a member of the elite samurai corps known as the “North-Facing Warriors.”

Living in these royal cloister-palaces, Norikiyo had the privileged experience of being exposed to the people and structures of the deceptive *insei* government. In his early poetry composed while living in the royal courts, he expresses ambivalence about the hypocrisy and contradictions of the Heian court: the emperor in the political palace of Heian-kyo is symbolically sovereign but actually impotent, while real power exists in the hands of retired emperors who have taken Buddhist vows to withdrawal from all worldly affairs.^{iv} Norikiyo’s purpose as a samurai was to maintain this hoarding of power and deception of the public, and his aversion to such a structure most likely contributed to his eventual decision to abandon a promising secular path.

In addition to his distaste for the political system of his time, there is evidence of events particular to his personal life that may have contributed to his ultimate decision to abandon the secular world. Some scholars argue that he had an affair with an older woman of a higher social position, or even a partner of the former emperor Toba.^v He may have developed strong feelings for her that could never be realized due to his social position, or their secrecy may have been uncovered, but either way such a situation may have contributed to his negative feelings about secular life.

Furthermore, there is evidence that the “North-Facing Warriors” were selected not only for their capacities in combat but also for their physical appearance, having the dual duties of giving the emperor security and physical pleasure. Noteworthy is the fact that though homosexual relations were common in the secluded palaces, they were generally unacceptable in the public Heian culture. Evidence suggests that this phenomenon

occurred in general in the royal Heian courts, but there is no particular evidence of Norikiyo's participation. Either way, the hypocrisy of the political elite and disconnect between fact and appearance is further elucidated by these phenomena, and may have contributed to Saigyō's perspective on the secular world, even if direct sexual exploitation did not.

More so than any other factor in his life that may have pushed him away from secular life, deeper existential concerns plagued the young Norikiyo and probably framed his perception of the aforementioned contradictions while pushing him to devote himself to spiritual realization. It is unclear when exactly he began investigating the teachings of Buddhism, but as a core aspect of Heian culture, Norikiyo definitely absorbed its essential ideas, such as the doctrine of karma. Because of his own warrior livelihood and the longstanding warrior tradition of his family, he could have felt a deep and heavy sense of shame or karmic guilt.^{vi} Within the medieval Buddhist worldview of young Norikiyo, such a sense would no doubt be powerful, to such an extent that he could feel unable to continue in his secular path. Relative to such a profound feeling, love affairs or sexual humiliation could only be catalysts in choosing a life of spiritual devotion. These speculations do not purport to be indisputable fact because there is a conspicuous lack of information regarding this transitional period, but they should at least elucidate possible motivations and feelings in the formative years of Saigyō's life. On the other hand, his aversion to the secular world and attraction to a life focused on spiritual realization is undeniable.

At the age of twenty-two, in an undocumented temple, Norikiyo was tonsured as a Buddhist monk, receiving the dharma name "Saigyō," or "Going West." This moment

marks an initial break with his secular past entangled in the inner circles of political power and deception, and a new beginning as a devoted Buddhist monk. However, unlike conventional monks of his time, Saigyō did not choose to live a monastic life. In medieval Japan, cutthroat competition and violence was common within and between Buddhist monasteries.^{vii} Buddhism teaches that such behavior is the product of egoism and worldly attachment, which are central obstacles to spiritual realization. It would not be a stretch to argue that for Saigyō, as an individual in search of a truer path than the one he left behind and in possession of an acute poetic sensibility, such deep hypocrisy could contribute to his preferring an alternative path.

Wandering and the Buddhist Tenet of Mujo: Beyond Permanence and Structure

Saigyō's aversion to society certainly informs his decision to abandon a promising path in the secular and political world for a solitary and uncertain life of spiritual and aesthetic pursuits. In the above narrative sketch, I explain possible motives for abandoning society, but they can only explain why he chose to abandon his particular path. They fall short of explaining why he chose never to return to society in general in a different place or role, and why unlike other monks and aesthetes, he was unable to reconcile spiritual and aesthetic devotion with a life in the world of man. The following seeks to explain Saigyō's general feelings about the world of man and his motives for embracing the way of wandering.

The most important belief that informs both his lament about the world of man and his appreciation for nature is the Buddhist notion of *mujo*, or impermanence. A belief common to all forms of Buddhism is that impermanence is the fundamental

condition of all things—no physical thing or structure is permanent. However, permanence is a premise of society, or rather, society and its members must strive for and believe in permanence for society to function and perpetuate. For a city such as Heian to exist, there must be physical infrastructure and economic, social, and political structures that are consistent and commonly accepted and enacted. This striving gives rise to competition, egoism, and most fundamentally attachment to the way things are, as if contingent and transient conditions could be eternal. Because Heian-kyo lasted for centuries as the capital, the “eternal city” may have seemed to its contemporaries that it somehow overcame or was impervious to the impermanent way of the world, as if the world of man were essentially distinct from the world of nature. It seems that Saigyō is averse to the world of man because of its strivings for permanence, and he is drawn into nature not merely because of its aesthetic value but because it represents this truth and acceptance of impermanence.

Saigyō’s sentiment towards man’s worldly affairs is apparent in many of his poems, including the following:

Delicate dewdrops
on a spider’s web are the pearls
strung on necklaces
worn in the world man spins:
a world quickly vanishing.^{viii}

Though man may put forth all of his energy, his worldly attachments and pursuits of permanence are futile: as delicate and impermanent as evanescent dewdrops strung on the microscopic fiber of a spider’s web. Attainment of a worldly goal entails failure, for time invariably grinds away all worldly structures and possessions. Saigyō also implies the superficial nature of man’s worldly aims, drawing a parallel between the dewdrops on a

spider's web and pearls on a necklace, which man wears merely for worldly recognition. Even Heian-kyo, the pillar of Japanese civilization, is doomed to evaporate and unwind, and even while it remains, the pleasures it affords are insignificant and trivial. This poem frames the world of man in a particularly Buddhist way, emphasizing with an air of foreboding the ephemeral and superficial nature of man's worldly projects. It reveals an essential aspect of Saigyō's concerns, namely that society is founded upon delusion.

During his early years, he lived in a hermitage near the capital of Heian, pursuing a life distanced from both the secular world and conventional religious life. Saigyō was not unique in this pursuit. In his time, the phenomenon of monks who pursued spiritual enlightenment free of the interference posed by a monastic life ridden with worldly attachments was relatively common. For Saigyō and these other hermits, abandoning "the world" meant not merely living a new life in the confines of a monastic space and lifestyle; it meant truly and fully breaking one's bonds with the world of man and its delusional influences.

While the seclusion accommodated by a hermit's life was peaceful enough for most to pursue spiritual paths, it was not sufficient for Saigyō.

To think you've thrown
the world away and then still
live unhidden is
to be like any other worldling
still dwelling in the world of men.^{ix}

Because of his proximity to Heian, city dwellers often passed through his area on walks or daytrips, making his life "unhidden." To realize that he was still a part of the lives of city dwellers is to realize he is still a part of the life of the city and the world of man, which sought to abandon entirely in becoming tonsured. Records indicate the Saigyō

spent no more than a couple years living in the outskirts of Heian, within walking distance of the city and his former acquaintances.^x If any of the speculations about a possible love affair or homosexual exploitation are true, then he would have been unhidden to those individuals as well. Furthermore, in such proximity to the city, he would have been in some way participating in the world of contradictions and attachments he sought to abandon, a fact probably magnified by his karmic guilt. This poem expresses that Saigyō's purpose of withdrawing from his old role was not to find a new one within society, but to make a total break.

As I mention above, Saigyō is not a pioneer in his choosing a Buddhist practice beyond the monastic structure. The *tonsei* tradition, translated as “escaping” or “abandoning” the world, is well established by Saigyō's time. There is also evidence that a unique “aesthete-recluse” tradition had emerged centuries prior to Saigyō, making him a paradigm example and product of this trend, even self-consciously.^{xi} These artist-monks sought tranquility and aesthetic inspiration in nature, isolated from the distractions of the world of man, but to frame Saigyō within this tradition without seeing how he differs from it would be misguided.

Though his aversion to society and attraction to nature is similar to the Buddhist hermits and aesthete-recluses, Saigyō makes a more complete break with the world of man. Common to the hermits and the aesthete-recluses is a vestige of structure and permanence, in that their condition outside or away from society is still defined by society. The hermits living on the outskirts of the capital are spatially anchored by the capital and defined as being “away” from a “home,” meaning their inhabited space has an order and center. Similarly, the aesthete-recluses abandon society and venture into nature

for solitary inspiration, but their condition is temporary and still defined by their role in society to which they will return.

On the other hand, after his brief experiment with conventional hermitic life, Saigyō embarks upon a permanent excursion, releasing from any spatial center or cultural role. There is a qualitative difference between the experience of a temporary excursion and the permanent journey, for the former inhabits a world of structure and permanence, whereas the latter is fundamentally unstructured and impermanent. The journey itself is Saigyō's home, completely unstructured and unanchored. In such a condition, there is no beginning or end, no home or away, and no destination beyond the lived moment, for that is the locus of the journey. His condition is a dialectic negation of all conventional spatial, social, linguistic, and experiential structures, and a total break with his life in the world of man.

It is important to note that Saigyō did not literally journey his entire life, in the sense that he was continuously on the move. Based on his own accounts and the records of others, Saigyō spent a substantial amount of time in various cultural and religious centers. After a few years living in a hermitage near Heian-kyō, he moved to the region of Mount Kōya, near a religious complex founded by Kūkai.^{xii} Saigyō's poetry from this time expresses a sense of distance from the world of man afforded by his location, with many poems beginning: "Deep in the mountains—."^{xiii} Saigyō returned to Kōya throughout his life but never made it a real home. During large portions of his life he was literally journeying, as his wayfaring was slow and physically arduous—some of his recorded journeys took as long as a year, as he moved in solitude through the turbulent whim of nature's elements. Sometimes his journeys have defined destinations, mainly

landmarks famous for their physical culture or natural sights made culturally significant through poetry and myth. He even returned to the capital at one point, after hearing the news of former Emperor Toba's death, whom he had served during his secular life.

Even though he sometimes returned to Koya or had a destination during his travels, he never again defined and structured his space by a new "home" or assumed a new role in society. Saigyō was the most traveled person on record in his time, and indicates in his poetry that he felt as though he inhabited a condition of permanent journeying, not a series of temporary excursions within a space structured around a constant hub.

Wandering as Religious Practice

Saigyō's total embrace of impermanence through perpetual wandering is a product of his religio-aesthetic sensibility, which fuses his Buddhist religious beliefs with a Japanese aesthetic. As I briefly show above, his aversion to society, beyond any personal history, is informed by the Buddhist tenet of *mujo*. The capital of Heian and the world of man in general are founded upon attachment to a delusion of permanence, and so he experiences it as a hub of dissonance and regrettable suffering. However, in the flowing cycles of nature, Saigyō discovers the locus of the Buddhist Absolute, a companion and teacher completely accepting of its impermanence.

The specific strand of Buddhist thought that informs his deepest spiritual beliefs is the Esoteric Buddhist tradition dating back to the influential thinker Kūkai (774-835), founder of the Shingon School in Japan. Because we do not know where he was tonsured, it would be presumptuous to classify Saigyō within a particular sub-school, but

he cites Kukai as an influence on many occasions and spends a significant amount of time visiting monasteries and temples associated with Esoteric Buddhism. In fact, the name Saigyō means “Going West,” which is an allusion to the Western Paradise of Pure Land Buddhism, another form of Esoteric Buddhism directly related to Shingon.

Kukai’s thought is especially important for the current analysis because his teachings on the value and meaning of nature directly inform Saigyō’s worldview and lifestyle. Japanese poetry has always placed a high aesthetic value on nature. However, the history of Japanese Buddhism is filled with debate about the meaning of man’s relationship to his natural environment. Kukai argued that the exoteric teachings originating with Gautama Buddha were fundamentally flawed in their belief that the natural world was somehow qualitatively distinct from the sacred or the absolute. Kukai’s teachings explain that the natural world is in fact the symbolic and actual locus of the sacred, or the “*samaya*-body of the Tathagata.”^{xiv} That is, the phenomena of nature are not merely vehicles or representations of the sacred, such that they point beyond themselves to some Absolute essence, but rather, the phenomena of nature are themselves the actual locus of the sacred. William Lafleur calls this conception the “Tathagata-which-is-nature,” meaning Buddha is the natural world and the natural world is Buddha.^{xv}

This conception of the sacred lends itself to Saigyō’s love of nature and his wandering lifestyle. For Saigyō, the form of nature is the form of the sacred, and the way of nature is the way of the sacred. His union with the “Tathagata-which-is-nature” is total and complete in that he immerses himself in its forms and beauty and harmonizes with its essential way of impermanence through a religious practice of wandering. This

type of conception also makes the worship of nature through the indigenous nature-based religion of Shinto possible, a synthesis endorsed by Kukai. The deities of Shinto, or *kami*, are traditionally identified as particular phenomena in nature, for example the cherry blossoms of spring. Just as nature is synonymous with the sacred for Kukai, the *kami* of Shinto become synonymous with the Buddha, as manifestations that have at their base the Buddhist absolute.^{xvi} The following poems evince this sensibility and experience, in which wandering is truly a religious practice for Saigyō.

Due to its attachments and delusions, society inhibits Saigyō's spiritual and aesthetic pursuits. It is therefore no surprise that the emerging clarity of his mind after abandoning society is evident in many of his poems. The following verse reveals the way in which his wandering has helped diffuse delusion leftover from his secular life:

The guardhouse
at famed Shirakawa gate
now ruined, lets the moon
filter in; its shaft is like
having another staying here.^{xvii}

In the midst of his journey, Saigyō stops at the Shirakawa guardhouse, a location made famous in poetry as a traditional symbol of the barrier separating the “civilized” culture centers of the South from the agrarian and “backward” cultures of the North.

Historically, it was constructed in the eighth century to prevent inhabitants of the North from moving South, and it therefore also symbolizes the grand political structures of society and civilization. Saigyō has recently divorced himself from these structures, but now finding himself in a guardhouse symbolizing the secular life he has given up, he experiences a moment of deep loneliness.^{xviii} In such a condition, the moon is a welcome

companion. The salient point of this verse is how his unification with the moon is facilitated by impermanence, which has realized itself in the decay of the guardhouse. If we take seriously the *samaya* notion of symbolization, this poem is not merely an aesthetic experience but rather a deeply religious realization of the sacred. Due to the impermanent condition of all things, including the constructs of man, Saigyô is able to visually unite with nature through the moon. Because the guardhouse is a construct of society in a general sense, this poem probably also signifies the way in which cognitive structures and habits constructed during his time in secular life, which once divided him from the sacred, are now breaking down due to his lifestyle of impermanence, and as a result his spiritual clarity and experiential union with nature are increasing.

The following poem is similar to the prior, though more poignant in its expression of accepting the impermanence of this world as a means to union with nature and the sacred:

This leaky, tumbledown
grass hut left an opening for the moon,
and I gazed at it
all the while it was mirrored
in a teardrop fallen on my sleeve.^{xix}

This poem falls into the category of “the literature of grass hermitages” in Japanese poetic tradition. As a part of the aesthete-recluse tradition, these poems express through the symbol of the hermit’s hut the experience of loneliness, poverty, simplicity, and physical suffering.^{xx} In Saigyô’s poetry, this aesthetic is enhanced by the Buddhist spiritual experience. Unlike the prior poem, Saigyô constructs this grass hut himself. Although he could construct a sturdy hut to effectively keep him dry and insulate him from the elements, it seems that he consciously chooses to construct a permeable shelter,

and again the impermanence of his structure facilitates his union with the moon. The hut functions here as a symbol of an original, primordial human construction filling the universal human need of shelter. In constructing this symbol Saigyō is aware of the paradox inherent to its creation, essentially that all human constructs ultimately breakdown and vanish. Saigyō trades the conventional functions of security and comfort for his spiritual and aesthetic needs, building a modest hut to remain in the spirit of impermanence and in contact with the sacred—the moon shines through his tattered roof because of this decision, an experience which seems to be both beautiful to him and somehow an instantiation of some essential truth. Through his way of impermanence, as represented here in how he builds his hut, Saigyō experiences direct contact with the sacred.

The language of this poem further underscores the spiritual meaning of his experience. In the Japanese, the first line “abaretaru” is desolate or even violent language, suggesting the recent passing of a storm. But by the end, the word “nagametsuru” is used, which means “to go on gazing and gazing” as if in a spiritual trance or dream of ultimate tranquility and acceptance.^{xxi}

An important term for understanding the prior poem and Saigyō’s aesthetic in general is the traditional Japanese aesthetic of *sabi*. *Sabi* is the aesthetic sensibility related to the beauty of *mujo* or impermanence, with implications of solitude and melancholy.^{xxii} If you have ever seen the beauty of rust, you have to some extent experienced the aesthetic of *sabi*. Though it is a traditional Japanese aesthetic, it takes on deeply religious significance within the pious Buddhist worldview of Saigyō. In many ways *sabi* is the epitome of Saigyō’s fusion of his aesthetic taste and spiritual beliefs, as an attention to

the beauty-which-is-truth of impermanence experienced in tranquil solitude. Through this traditional Japanese aesthetic Saigyō experiences the Absolute.

In another poem Saigyō again uses the traditional symbol of the hermit's hut, while directly expressing his sentiments about the impermanence of any human construct:

Nowhere is there place
to stop and live, so only
everywhere will do:
each and every grass-made hut soon leaves
its place within this withering world^{xxiii}

Because no place of permanence exists in this “withering world” and no human construct is able to overcome this truth, a physical or spatial “home” is an impossibility.

Paradoxically, because no place can be properly called home, everywhere is home for Saigyō. That is, the journey itself is Saigyō's dwelling, as symbolized by his wandering ways and the manner in which he constructs his grass huts. This idea is an interesting spin on Mircea Eliade's notion of the physical home as a symbol of grounding and ordering in the human experience. Whereas the traditional home is a space man constructs to symbolize order and the spatial center of his cosmos, Saigyō's home is nowhere and therefore “everywhere”; beyond any particular space, all space and every moment is his home because establishing any permanent construct or order is impossible. For Saigyō, the transient huts he constructs are symbolic and actual instantiations of the truth of impermanence and his union with this truth, just as his own wandering way is both symbolically and actually a harmonization and union with the Tathagata-which-is-nature.

The following poem expresses this feeling of unity with the sacred realized by journeying through nature:

Snow has fallen on
field paths and mountain paths,
burying them all,
and I cant tell here from there:
my journey in the midst of sky.^{xxiv}

An indiscriminate blanket of snow has rendered Saigyo's visual field a homogeneous whiteness. The visual effect of this is the blending unity of the entire landscape, covering all details. The divergent paths that are covered seem to represent duality, between field and mountain, low and high, but the idea of path in general, as the product of human activity, represents in this situation a distinction between man and his surroundings, or the way of man versus the way of nature. To follow the path of others or leave a trail is to participate in the world of man and live out of contact with nature and the sacred. It is to inhabit a cosmos of structure, in which man's space or way is distinct from other space or ways. However, Saigyo inhabits a condition of permanent journey, in an unstructured impermanent cosmos. Because the snow has rendered his entire visual field a homogenous white, all spatial distinctions and structures between here and there, this and that, I and not-I dissolve into an experiential unity and emptiness, which Saigyo describes as "my journey in the midst of sky." The Japanese word *sora*, signifying sky in the above verse, also connotes the Buddhist idea of Emptiness. The experience of a "journey in the midst of sky" therefore signifies both the sky and Emptiness, or the Buddhist Absolute. Both symbolically and actually, this poem expresses an experience of total

spiritual clarity and union with the sacred, as all spatio-visual distinctions collapse in the Emptiness of journeying.

This particular poem presents an opportunity to further understand the way in which Saigyō's idea and feeling of the Tathagata-which-is-nature lends itself to a way of wandering, as opposed to a more conventional spiritual discipline. The more traditional form of Buddhist practice in Saigyō's time was monastic life, in which monks lived relatively secluded lives in the spatial confines of the monastery. Monastic life was extremely organized, focused mainly around contemplation and meditation. This religious practice of meditation is a means to nonattachment and acceptance of impermanence, and ultimately enlightenment. This practice is structured such that meditation and the entire ordered lifestyle is a means to an end, namely enlightenment. Subsequently, enlightenment and Emptiness are posited as beyond the lived space and moment, as future destinations toward which the practice leads. Such a conception lends itself to a stable and structured lifestyle, in which the practice is a means to an end.

In Kūkai's theory, on the other hand, Emptiness is not distinct from the here and the now in nature. He explains this idea by saying, "Matter is no other than mind; mind, no other than matter. Without any obstruction, they are interrelated."^{xxv} This is synonymous with the message of the Heart Sutra, "Form does not differ from Emptiness, Emptiness does not differ from Form, that which is Form is Emptiness and that which is Emptiness Form." This conflation parallels Kūkai's notion of signification, in which nature is both a symbol of Buddha and its total actuality. This type of Buddhism has been called "dialectical Buddhism," in that a seeming duality is synthesized into a totalizing unity.^{xxvi} Within this belief set there is no worldly "here" and heavenly

“there,” or profane “this” and sacred “that.” Just as Form and Emptiness are identical, so too are the practice and the goal, or the journey and the destination. All of these structures dialectically collapse, as the Form of nature becomes the locus of Emptiness, the practice itself becomes the locus of enlightenment, and the journey itself becomes the destination. If one sees the world in this way, just as Saigyō did, the way of wandering is a deeply religious practice that reflects and embodies the way of the Absolute, as manifest in the impermanent forms of nature. Saigyō is always everywhere arriving at his destination, dwelling in the eternal condition of journeying, in union with the totality of the sacred. In following the teaching of impermanence found in nature and completely committing the entirety of his being to its whim and way, Saigyō realizes the same goals of nonattachment and acceptance of impermanence that conventional monks realize through monastic life.

This dialectic conflation is unambiguously expressed in the following poem:

Cloudfree mountains
encircle the sea, which holds
the reflected moon:
this transforms islands into
emptiness holes in a sea of ice.^{xxvii}

As Saigyō looks down upon the sea, the moon reflects upon a placid sea rendering it a glassy white, and in contrast the islands appear as wholes of blackness. Visually, the solid forms of the islands become emptiness, while the fluid water becomes the solid form of ice. As Lafleur argues, this poem is self-consciously “metaphysical,” in that it expresses this higher-level notion of the unity of Form and Emptiness.^{xxviii} The word *taema*, which is used in the last line to mean “holes” also connotes the Buddhist notion of

emptiness, further underscoring that this poem and this experience is not merely beautiful and symbolic but actually an instantiation of absolute truth.

Tension and Resolution between his Worldly and Spiritual Pursuits

Thus far I have characterized Saigyō as a monk-poet that seamlessly fuses his artistic and spiritual ambitions into a properly religio-aesthetic sensibility through a life of wandering in the beauty-which-is-truth of nature-which-is-Buddha. However, much of his poetry expresses deep sentiments of the tension between these conventionally divergent drives, and the complicated relationship between the beauty and pain of impermanence. The following is an attempt to elucidate this darker side of Saigyō, concerned with his attachment to the fleeting forms of nature, his own impermanence, and the cataclysmic warfare that erupted in the world of man during his lifetime.

The three centuries of peace and tranquility that defined the Heian period came to an abrupt and devastating close, when the civil political system of emperor control was destroyed in an insurrection by the warrior class, establishing military rule in Japan. The first signs of instability flared in the wake of former Emperor Toba's death, in 1156. During his retirement, Toba had been one of the most powerful figures in the political backstage of the *insei* government, and in his absence a struggle for power ensued between two of Toba's sons. Ultimately, Emperor Go-Shirakawa ascended to power, paradoxically acquiring authority as he retired into a cloistered life. This came to be called the Hogen Disturbance, and though the *insei* system remained, it resulted in a significant increase in the influence of warrior clans in Heian-kyō, who had been politically powerless in the past. Three years later, the rival warrior clans Taira and

Minamoto faced off in what is known as the Heiji Rebellion, in which the Minamoto forces loyal to Go-Shirakawa were defeated by the Taira rebels. The rivalry submerged for about twenty years, until 1180 when the rival clans disagreed over new candidates for the throne. The resulting violence, known as the Gempei War, lasted five years and consumed the entire Japanese political structure, bringing violence throughout the civilization. When war finally ended in 1185, the civil government of the emperor had been replaced by the military rule of the shogunate, ushering in a completely new era of Japanese history.

Throughout his lifetime, Saigyō remained aware of the emerging violence and ultimate downfall of order and peace. In fact, it is probable that the tension factored into his decision to abandon his secular path, pushing him away from human strife and suffering into the impermanent way of nature. This was probably compounded by the Buddhist belief known as *Mappō*, or the “End of the Law.” In the moment of *Mappō*, it is believed that the teachings the Buddha lose their power over the minds of man and the order of society, at which point enlightenment becomes impossible and the world of man is plunged into total chaos. It was a common belief at the time that the emerging tension and violence indicated the beginning of the period of *Mappō*, a fact that may have informed Saigyō’s perspective of the events, and enhanced his appreciation for nature, in contrast to the chaos of the world of man.

His awareness of the events and profound lament for the unnecessary suffering are evident in the following:

“In the world of men it came to be a time of warfare. Throughout the country—west, east, north, and south—there was no place where the war was not being

fought. The count of those dying because of it climbed continually and reached an enormous number. It was beyond belief! And for what on earth was this struggle taking place? A most tragic state of affairs:

There's no gap or break
in the ranks of those marching
under the hill:
an endless line of dying men,
coming on and on and on...^{xxix}

The bleak and literal depiction reveals his deep opposition to warfare, a livelihood he once called his own. This entry also implies that he believes devastation and suffering in the world of man, on the level of individual and society, is a consequence of the exact same patterns of thought and behavior that once maintained the illusion of permanence, namely worldly attachment and nonacceptance of impermanence: “And for what *on earth* was this struggle taking place?” His rhetorical question emphasizes that the suffering and dying of warfare signify attachment to worldly power and stability. Though aware and concerned with the suffering and violence in the world of man, the events only reinforced Saigyō's faith in the impermanent way of nature.

However, Saigyō's passion for the beauty of nature was also of concern to him, as he expresses deep awareness of the apparent tension with his Buddhist vow of nonattachment. In some of the poems above, Saigyō's vision of the moon symbolizes profound spiritual insight and unity with the sacred through the condition of impermanence, but his other favorite natural phenomena, namely the cherry blossoms of spring, often tormented him spiritually as much as they moved him aesthetically. Throughout his life he spent a significant amount of time in and around Mount Yoshino, known through Japan for its beautiful cherry blossoms. More so than any other location, Saigyō felt “attached” to this place and the beauty of its natural phenomena.^{xxx}

Why do I, who broke
 so completely with this world,
 find in my body
 still the pulsing of a heart
 once dyed in blossoms' hues?^{xxx}

“Detached” observer
 of blossoms finds himself in time
 intimate with them—
 so, when they separate from the branch,
 it's he who falls...deeply into grief.^{xxxii}

In both of these verses, the tension between his devotion to nonattachment and his passion for the beauty of the blossoms is clear, and even self-consciously expressed. The phenomenon of cherry blossoms, emerging out of the dreariness of winter in an evanescent explosion of colors and warmth, are an archetypal instantiation of the beauty-which-is-truth of impermanence for Saigyō, as the phenomenon is only beautiful in so much as it is ephemeral and occurs within a world of constant flux and cycles. As the most intense manifestation of the combination of his religious and aesthetic sensibility, they press upon the apparent tension more so than any other phenomenon.

Though he is aware of the tension in his passion for the cherry blossoms, it is no less reconcilable than in his moments of contemplating the moon. The *sabi* aesthetic is in these works a religio-aesthetic category of experience. Though his passions are more intensely aroused, he considers them as organic reflections to external phenomena; though they happen within him, he observes them as he observes the cherry blossoms.

I thought I was free
 of passions, so this melancholy

comes as a surprise:
 a woodcock shoots up in marsh
 where autumn twilight falls.^{xxxiii}

The poem begins in the subjective realm of introspection and feeling, but in the final two lines he describes in very literal language an objective, external event. The sharp juxtaposition isolates the two events, namely the emergence of melancholy and the woodcock, but it also links them in an organic way. Saigyō is equally surprised by the bursting forth of his melancholy as he is by the woodcock that darts out from the tranquil darkening marsh, as though he were no more than an observer of these phenomena that seem to necessarily arise together. His inner melancholy is no more than a reflection of the external event, such that they are in essence a single event, and Saigyō is merely a nonattached observer. In the following poem, he expresses the notion that his feelings for natural phenomena are as natural as the phenomena themselves, while expressing his appreciation for impermanence:

A world without
 the scattering of blossoms,
 without the clouding
 over of the moon, would deprive
 me of my melancholy.^{xxxiv}

In this verse, he makes melancholy and the aesthetic of *sabi* conditional upon the transience of the natural phenomena of cherry blossoms and the moon, meaning without impermanence he would feel no passion and see no beauty. In a world of constancy and permanence, forms and conditions can be taken for granted and drained of their aesthetic and spiritual value. Saigyō here is grateful for his seeming grief and pain in the fleeting

beauty of cherry blossoms, for it is through their impermanence that they become meaningful and beautiful instantiations of truth. Similarly, it is through his embrace of wandering that his environment evolves like the cherry blossoms: constantly emerging and fleeting, and through this he lives the beauty of impermanence.

It seems that he is able to accept the impermanence of all phenomena, even those that he considers most inspirational and beautiful, but it has yet to be explored whether he accepts the most significant and difficult consequence of impermanence in human life—namely, the end of human life in death. In abandoning himself to the unpredictable, unstable way of wandering, Saigyō committed himself to a life of grueling physical endurance and pain, in intimate and vulnerable contact with the whim of nature's elemental forces. Unlike the predictability and stability of life in society during peacetime, death is always possibly imminent in nature. However, if we accept his poetry as true expression of his feelings, it seems that he had even accepted the inevitability of his own passing.

My cold corpse
covered forever with moss
for bedding will
recollect what it learned here
from dew on a rock's cold, dark side.¹

My body will somewhere fall
by the wayside into a state of
sleep and still more sleep—
like the dew that each night appears,
then falls from roadside grasses.^{xxxv}

In both verses Saigyō draws an analogy between his own physical existence and that of dew, the most delicate and evanescent of phenomena, which forms in the coolness of

¹ Ibid, 10.

evening and evaporates in the warmth of day. As Saigyō inspects the underside of a rock, he projects himself into the future, past his death, saying that his corpse will rest peacefully “forever with moss for bedding” because of the lesson of impermanence that it learns from the dew on the rock. Similarly, the second verse seems to be the product of contemplation while walking along a road, possibly in the midst of a journey. He expresses the understanding that he too is an ephemeral phenomenon that forms and dissolves in the midst of journeying along the path, just like the dew on the roadside grasses. Both of these poems express an awareness and even welcoming of death, as a necessary event inseparable from the impermanence of the Tathagata-which-is-nature.

In a prophetic verse, Saigyō expresses his request to die in the midst of his two favorite natural phenomena: the full moon and the cherry blossoms.

Let it be in spring
and under cherry blossoms that
I die, while the moon
is perfect at midmonth, like
it was for his peaceful passing.^{xxxvi}

Though Saigyō composed this poem a decade before his death, his prediction came to be, as he passed away in spring under the full moon, as it was for Shakyamuni Buddha.

Whether this poem predicted an actual event or served as the root of an idealized mythology, Saigyō’s unity with his environment is undeniable. Saigyō’s way of wandering and impermanence is for him the ultimate expression of what he considers the fundamental condition of himself and all things in the world. It is both a symbolic gesture and an actual union with the sacred Tathagata-which-is-nature. Dwelling in the condition of impermanence, he exists beyond spatial and temporal structure, merged with the way of emptiness as form, in the eternal flow and cycles of nature.

Notes:

- ⁱ Burton Watson, *Saigyō: Poems of a Mountain Home*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 1.
- ⁱⁱ William R. Lafleur, *Awesome Nightfall*, (New York: Wisdom Publications, 2003), 17.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 8.
- ^{iv} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 12.
- ^v Watson, *Saigyō: Poems of a Mountain Home*, 4.
- ^{vi} Lafleur, *Awesome Nightfall*, 15.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 17.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 128.
- ^{ix} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 18.
- ^x *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 18.
- ^{xi} Tokue, Mezaki. "Aesthete-Recuses." *Principles of Classical Japanese Literature*. Earl Miner, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 152.
- ^{xii} Lafleur, *Awesome Nightfall*, 19.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 20.
- ^{xiv} *Ibid.* "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature Part 1," *History of Religions* Vol. 13, No. 2, (Nov. 1973): 1, 99.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature Part 2," *History of Religions* Vol. 13, No. 3, (Feb. 1974): 240.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 52.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 23
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 23
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 86
- ^{xx} Tokue, "Aesthete-Recluses," 150.
- ^{xxi} Lafleur, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature Part 2," 241.
- ^{xxii} Pilgrim, "The Artistic Way and the Religio-Aesthetic Tradition in Japan," *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 27, No. 3, (Jul. 1977): 297.
- ^{xxiii} Lafleur, *Awesome Nightfall*, 151.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 96.
- ^{xxv} *Ibid.*, "Saigyō and the Buddhist Value of Nature Part 1," 99.
- ^{xxvi} Barnhill, David L., "Basho as Bat: Wayfaring and Antistructure in the Journals of Matsuo Basho," *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 49, No. 2 (May 1990): 288
- ^{xxvii} Lafleur, *Awesome Nightfall*, 36.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 37.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 44.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 54.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 78.
- ^{xxxii} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 80.
- ^{xxxiii} *Ibid.*, *Awesome Nightfall*, 86.

^{xxxiv} Ibid., *Awesome Nightfall*, 77.

^{xxxv} Ibid., *Awesome Nightfall*, 108.

^{xxxvi} Ibid., *Awesome Nightfall*, 69.

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