

**Beauty is the Color of Truth:
Exploring Buddhist Wisdom for Awakening Society**

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The Nō actor and theorist, Zeami Motokiyo (ca 1363-1443) understood the efficacy of beauty to evoke inexpressible, inconceivable, and formless landscapes, when he coined the expression, “Beauty is the color of truth.”¹ “Beauty” is the “color” or form of the formless reality of being that a Nō performer perfects through long years of study and practice. Zeami identifies “truth” with “beauty” and “color,” tangible qualities that can be felt, seen, heard, smelled, and tasted. “Color” is an English rendering for “*shiki*.” “*Shiki*,” the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit “*rūpa*,” can also be read “*iro*.” Ordinarily, the colloquial “*iro*” refers to the hues that are visible to the human eye. In the context of Japanese Buddhist discourse, when “*iro*” is read as “*shiki*” the expression stands in opposition to “*kū*,” (“*sūnyatā*” or “emptiness”). “*Shiki*” thus means “form,” that is, sensible qualities and entities. Zeami’s use of “*shiki*” in the *Kakyō* (Mirror held to the Flower), *Yūgaku shūdōfūken* (Disciplines for Joy), and other treatises is in concert with its usage in the *Prajñāpāramita Sūtras* that date to the first century BCE India and Mādhyamika discourse.

The claim that “beauty is the color of truth” raises at least three conceptual concerns for the Buddhist aesthetician, namely:

- 1) What is the relationship between art (color and beauty or form) and truth/reality (formlessness)?
- 2) How does art give form to the formless truth?
- 3) What is formless beauty?

The first question raises metaphysical questions concerning the relationship between reality and appearance; the second highlights the creative process; and the third establishes the basis for aesthetic judgment. These questions also raise at least one academic concern, namely do these questions fall into the preview of the academic disciplines that study quantifiable phenomena? Relying on non-verbal and a-rational modes of expression, the artist is more interested in the process of giving form to his or her creative intuition.

¹ This is a paraphrase. I have not been able to locate these exact words in Zeami’s writing. The thrust of this paraphrase is found in *Kakyō* in the chapter *Myōsho no koto*. See Makoto Ueda in *Literary and Art Theories in Japan* (p. 61) comes closest to crystallizing this paraphrase.

I offer some reflections on these questions on based on my appreciation of Buddhist aesthetics and philosophy and my training in the study of *sho* (calligraphy).² “*Sho*” or “writing” is the simple exercise of writing ideograms and phonetic script to communicate thoughts and to share information. The ink traces that appear on a writing surface reveal the writer’s facility in the use of the brush and knowledge of a written language. Aesthetic and creative interests lead the *sho*-artist:

- 1) To explore ideographic styles and developments, to give expressive shape to their meanings...
- 2) To “play” with their constructions (form and stroke order)...
- 3) To explore the potential and limitations of the soft brush and the textures of ink and paper...
- 4) To give form to feelings and thought through line, space, and time.

I do not dwell on the technical aspects of the use of brush, ink, and paper in writing ideograms; nor do I consider the aesthetical qualities of space and line. I refer the interested reader to my articles “Formless Form, Reflections on the Art of *Sho* (Calligraphy)”³ and “Yanagi Sōetsu and the Pure Land of Beauty.”⁴

1) Art (color and beauty or form) and truth/reality (formlessness)?

Zeami used the expression *yūgen* to refer the spiritual reality that emerges from the Nō master. *Yūgen*, “refined elegance” in the Nō performance reveals a profound beauty in pathos of the fleeting experience of the human condition. The artist-performer can give form to this understanding when this truth is genuinely felt and is part of his or her being. The Nō performance and other art-forms are thus windows that allow us to peer into the vast mind-space of being. Echoing this sentiment, Zeami writes, “The essentials of our art live in the spirit. They represent a true enlightenment established through art” (Zeami 90). Such a performer “...possesses the ability to create for his audience an intensity of pure feeling that goes beyond the workings of the mind” (Zeami 91).

Similarly Zen scholar and aesthetician Hisamatsu Shin’ichi (1889-1980) states that task of the Zen artist is to give form to the formless reality of being. Zen art is the expression of formless form (*muso-no-so*) (Hisamatsu 1971:45-52). Genuine Zen art is not art work that depicts Buddhist themes, but expresses some essential truth of the Zen experience (Hisamatsu 1973:21). The Zen artist gives form to the beauty of

² The East Asian literati tradition expects scholars to master the use of the soft brush.

³ “Formless form: the aesthetics of *sho* (calligraphy),” *Arts in Religion and Theological Studies*, 2010, Vol. 21 no. 2:4-11.

⁴ “Yanagi Sōetsu and the Pure Land of Beauty.” In *Nippon Bukkyō bunka ron ronsō*. [Kyoto: Nagata, 1998: 478-461.

his/her formless reality or non-being, which I understand to be the living experience of self-realization, the core of the Buddhist reality and the basis from which the artist's craft emerges. What is given form is the mind/being of the creator-artist. Great art and great performances offer glimpses into formless reality of the artist's "spiritual-dwelling- place."

Zeami crystallizes the Sino-Japanese understanding that training in the arts and crafts is a legitimate vehicle for meditation that can lead to and express the Buddhist realization.⁵ It was also the pedagogy of Morita Shiryū (1912-1998), an avant-garde calligrapher with who I studied with for seven years. But I was most startled and befuddled when during one of our many conversations, he said,

"I look forward to growing old."

"But, why?", I asked, a bit amused and bewildered.

"I want to see how my art will grow and change."

I was 26 at the time and Morita 58. I did not think deeply on our exchange; but it surfaced into consciousness as I was nearing the end of one life-cycle (sixty years old) according to the Chinese zodiac. In retrospect, at the time Morita, who possessed an uncommon understanding of the history and aesthetics of *sho*, was intensively exploring his craft as a vehicle to deepen and give form to his *kyōgai* or "spiritual-dwelling-place." Practice and exploration of the art of *sho* is a vehicle for deepening the understanding of the self.

2) Giving Form to the Formless

The task of Zen artist is to give form to his or her Zen experience. How to give form to this experience is an undertaking for anyone who has discovered a new landscape and who wishes to communicate where he or she has been and experienced. Lord Buddha's meditational explorations led to the sighting of a heretofore unknown spiritual landscape, which is crystallized with the expression "*pratītyasamutpāda*." As a verbal metaphor for a living reality and its topography, *pratītyasamutpāda* enables those who have not been there to imagine an inexpressible, inconceivable and

⁵ The idea that discipline in the arts and crafts to be a viable method to truth or enlightenment can be traced to Baizhang Huaihai (720-814), who believed that physical labor was an opportunity for meditation practice and that manual labor offered practical and spiritual benefits. Baizhang's famous maxim: "no work, no food" was an attempt to accommodate the Chinese societal expectation that people, including clerics should work for their livelihood. Begging is still looked down on in Chinese cultures.

formless sacred geography.⁶ The experience of an unexplored realm remains known only to the adventurer, until he or she can intelligibly report what is seen and felt. Fashioning an appropriate word or suitable metaphor, symbol or descriptive concept through which the unknown can be made comprehensible is most a creative task. Expressional truth is, of course, not limited to language or doctrines, but can be conveyed through form and color, sound, movement, and touch, mediums which the creative arts exploit. These non-verbal, often a-rational expressions re-imagine, enrich, and also give color to truth and form to spiritual epiphany.

Operationally, the artist intuits “original images”—primal and elemental experiences—and expresses these images through form, color, movement, sound or space. These expressions give form to the creator’s experiences—feelings, thoughts, emotions that are formless. The artist’s task is to give outward appearance to these insightful experiences and memories that reside in and are part of his/her being. But how do we understand and ascertain the universal validity of an intensely personal journey and experience of “truth”? Artistic director Tony Taccone writes in the *Berkeley Reparatory Magazine*.

...artists are pursuing “the truth” as seen through the prism of their particular consciousness within the context of the historical moment of creation. They are trying to see the truth below the surface, using their perceptual and imaginative ability to capture the deeper essence of something. All the while, they are aware of the difficulty of the task—because just as one defines the essence of something, that essence slips away and transforms in to something else. The world, as we know, is ever-changing, simultaneously being born and dying. So “the truth” for an artist is not a fixed piece of knowledge or an absolute, metaphysical reality. It is a description of singular reality born of a singular moment as seen through a singular lens. The irony is that Art is the world re-imagined in its most subjective form, which, if successful, feels like “the truth” (Taccone 6).

Taccone’s commentary on the artistic “truth” of Danny Hoch identified two tasks. The artist seeks to discover “truth” and to give form to this “truth.” Hoch’s efforts can be likened to Lord Buddha’s own efforts to explain his understanding of and method for transcending suffering. Had Lord Buddha not made an effort to articulate his understanding, his insights would have remained unappreciated and untested. Such is

⁶ See my essay, “Spiritual Cartography: Mapping the Huayen Mind.” In *Humanity and Religion in the Age of Science*. Kyoto: Nagata, 2010, pp. 131-155.

the task of the spiritual explorer, the artist, writer, scientist or anyone who ventures into worlds that have never been explored and believes that his or her discovery is beneficial. If it is the artist's responsibility to give form to transient realities or even absolute realities how can we measure or judge the success of the creative task? What quality or qualities do we "measure"?

3) Formless Beauty

Morita held in high regard the expression of *kyōgai* in the very late works of the Japanese Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768). Hakuin begins to offer tantalizing glimpses of his spiritual maturity at sixty; and who only after the age of eighty did his "profound and authentic *kyōgai* inspire his work" (Morita 132:12-14). Ordinarily "*kyōgai*" refers to one's socio-economic status, but in Japanese Buddhist culture it refers to a spiritual and aesthetic quality that reveals fullness for and capacity for life that can only come from long experience in living. Expressing his appreciation of Hakuin's late works Yamamoto Hatsuhiro writes,

In [the calligraphy and sketches of] Hakuin there is no skill, no maturity, no seasoned experience, no dignity, no ornamentation, nor beauty. There is only strength; there is this uncommon quality. I sense in his *sho* and ink-sketches strength that transcends all places and all time (Yamamoto 78:13).

Yamamoto struggles to find words to describe insights that Hakuin issues forth. Sensing a reality beyond the empirical aesthetic values of form, color, shapes, composition, and technical skill, Yamamoto calls attention to the "strength" and "uncommon quality" in Hakuin's lines. The "strength" reveals a transcendent equanimity. This "peerless beauty...beyond our common understanding is something other than art" (Yamamoto 1959:13-14). Free from all attachments Hakuin's *sho* (calligraphy) and sketches exhibit an artlessness that emerges from the undifferentiated Buddha-mind. These ink-traces manifest rarified existential moments (*zenki* or Zen-moment) of his formless *kyōgai*. Emerging from the deepest, most fundamental and formless self, these forms reveal his authentic self. The artless genius of Hakuin is rare. Such brilliance is rooted, not in technical skill or mastery of aesthetic principles, but in *kyōgai*, the great capacity for and fullness of life. It is seldom seen in the young, who may be able to master technique in the use of material and tools; but the wisdom or genius of being "human" that cannot be rushed.

A profound *kyōgai* issues forth when an individual discards distracting fugitive emotions and popular images, self-willing and self-thinking. Hakuin "visualizes" and/or "feels" the form of the character or poem proceeds to give them form. What is intuitively known in this formless space; what immediately arises from

“the immanent heart-mind space” is the source from which the artist proceeds to give form. The image or *sho* is preordained: reflecting the artist’s world view; evincing a life-long discipline that seeks to eliminate distractions generated by egoism/self assertion that leads to self-identification and true knowledge of the object to be rendered. This is also required of the Indian artisan of Buddhist images. He, who draws a figure, if he cannot be it, cannot draw it. Knower and known; seer and seen must merge in transcending non-distinction (Coomaraswamy 15-28).

Judging the validity of genuine expressions of the Zen experience raises many rational and intellectual questions. I will respond only by referring to the Lord Buddha’s response to Kālāmas. The Buddha advised Kālāmas not to accept uncritically the authority of revelation, tradition, report, a renowned teacher, or revered text. The Buddha did not exclude his own path to this test. Lord Buddha underscores that his Dharma is only a guide, and that he is not an authority. A doctrine or teaching is valid if it promotes virtue, moral attainment, and happiness. Similarly, if his teachings and practices do not lead to spiritual ease, Lord Buddha recommended other paths (Saṅghabhadra 171-173). The early documents speak of the *pratyekabuddha*, who achieved enlightenment without the aid of Lord Buddha’s Dharma. The validity of a path lies in its capacity to lead to spiritual ease. Those that do not should be avoided (Jayatilleke 1966, 22-24).

While this approach may be open to accusations of relativism, Lord Buddha acknowledged ultimate validation of his Dharma is its efficacy to relieve suffering and to inspiring people to work toward this end. The relieving suffering is not measured against ideological absolutes, but its practical outcomes. Similarly does a work of art or performance take offer a glimpse in the formless reality of the artist’s spiritual dwelling-place? Does it teach us to live with equanimity? Does it change the way we see and live?

Concluding Remarks

I briefly considered the relationship between beauty and truth by briefly reflecting on three questions:

- 1) What is the relationship between art (color and beauty or form) and truth/reality (formlessness)?
- 2) How does art give form to the formless truth?
- 3) What is formless beauty?

These questions are implicit in the statement “Beauty is the color of truth.” I have framed my remarks within parameters of Buddhist thought and aesthetics; and on my experience with the art of *sho*.

Art and aesthetics differs from academic discourse. In addition to dealing with the uncertainties of memory and indeterminate sensitivities, the arts draw attention to emotions, feelings, and other affective aspects of our human experience. In contrast academic disciplines are engaged in quantifying experience; thus precision in language and syntax, and clarity of discourse are prime virtues. Academic disciplines can lend their expertise to develop language to articulate with clarity affective experience and though such exercise provide artists the tools to further exploration the “spiritual-dwelling-places” of artists and spiritual mentors. The colors of rarefied “spiritual-dwelling-places” illuminate the beauty of truth.

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