A reply to Jim Kacian's "Realism Is Dead (and Always Was)."

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I found Jim Kacian's "Realism Is Dead (and Always Was)" published in *Modern Haiku* 47.2 (summer 2016) an insightful argument for expanding the possibilities of haiku. He distinguishes between realism and mindspace as key terms in understanding the nature of haiku, and he argues that haiku is not realistic poetry that transparently presents the objective world (sono mama). Instead, it consists of literary triggers that creatively manipulate our mindspace. The import of haiku, then, is not found in some objective world presented in images but the subjective emotional response in the writer and reader.

Perhaps as a complement to his argument, I would like to offer another perspective—a different critique of realism—one that is influenced by East Asian religion and aesthetics. To explore this, we first need to head into the subtle and rather murky waters of Buddhism and Daoism.

Perhaps the two most fundamental, indeed unquestionable, assumptions in our psyche are the distinction between objective reality and subjective consciousness and the existence of a self (the possessor of that consciousness and separate from the world-out-there). Claims that these may be a delusion are not simply rejected; they are in fact incomprehensible. Any alternative simply does not make sense in our worldview.

But Buddhism and Daoism have long offered an incomprehensible alternative. This is the experience in which the subject/object distinction is lost, in which we can no longer speak of a subjective mindspace versus objective reality, a self and a world-out-there. Perhaps a personal example (albeit quite limited and superficial) might suggest this type of experience. I was backpacking in the northern Cascades and camping at White Pass. At sunset I sat gazing across the seemingly endless expanse of ridge after ridge. My subjective mind was experiencing this exterior scene, and was chattering to itself about how beautiful it was, comparing it to vistas in the Sierras, thinking how fortunate I was (etc., etc.), but slowly

my mind quieted down, and eventually I was no longer looking out at mountains. There was simply: mountains. I had become so absorbed in the scene that I lost the sense of separation from it; all that remained was the pure experience of mountains. I believe the poet T.S. Eliot had this type of experience in mind in *Dry Salvages*: "music heard so deeply / That it is not heard at all, but you are the music / While the music lasts."

Such an experience is not subjective in the normal sense of being in the mind of an individual self, nor is it objective in the sense of being separate from consciousness. Consciousness and reality are one thing. Here we enter into the subtleties of what Buddhism calls "thusness" (or "suchness"). This complex word refers to two things at once. First, it refers to the actual way reality exists, which in Buddhism and Daoism fundamentally means radical interpenetration and continuous flux. We live not in a world of static things but as part of a fluid matrix of interrelationships. Second, it refers to how things exist when experienced without desire, aversion, and (most importantly) the delusion of a self that possesses a consciousness that is separate from an objective world.

Thusness, then, refers to both a quality of reality and a type of experience. Note how the first aspect is couched in objective language ("reality") and the second in subjective language ("experience"). Language simply cannot directly or accurately manifest nondualistic reality. But it can indirectly suggest this kind of experience-reality, and Buddhism and Daoism have come up with various ways to do so.

In Chinese aesthetics, for instance, this ideal has been put in terms of the object entering into the artist: "To paint bamboo, one must first obtain a complete one in one's breast." Another way of putting this ideal has been that the artist transforms into the object: "When [Wen Tong] paints bamboo, / ... / he leaves behind his corporeal self. / His body transforms into the bamboo...."[1] In *Essays of Kyorai*, Bashō's disciple Kyorai put this ideal of oneness in different terms: the poet enters into the object.

> The Master said, "Learn of the pine from the pine, learn of the bamboo from the bamboo." In other words, one must become detached from the subjective self. If one understands this idea of "learning" to be by the self,

> the result will be no learning at all. "To learn" means to enter into the object and to feel the subtlety that is revealed there—then the poem grows by itself. No matter how clearly one represents an object's form, if the poem lacks the feeling that arises naturally out of the object, the self and the object form a duality and the poem does not achieve genuineness [makoto]. The poetic meaning would have come from the self.

In the same text, Kyorai also uses the simpler language of unification: "For the poet who dwells in accord with true poetry [*fūga*], the mind's movements merge with the object, and in this way the form of the poem emerges. The object is taken in its nature, without obstruction."[2] In all these descriptions, the point is that artists must go beyond their own private mindspace and enter into the unbounded space in which consciousness and reality are one.

But in such a state of oneness and this realization of thusness, what happens with language and imagery? Buddhologist William LaFleur claims that Buddhism rejects the conventional notion of symbols because symbols point us away from direct experience of immediate reality—thusness.

> This critique of symbols brought [Buddhism] into a very specific aesthetic mode.... It requires the return of a poet's perceptions and mind to the simple recognition of phenomena. This recognition is powerful because it represents a *renewed* simplicity rather than a naïve simplicity.... The poetry that results from and expresses this aesthetic mode invites us to see things in and for themselves; it deliberately rejects the attempt to discover 'meanings,' implications hidden or coded into a poem.[3]

LaFleur's point is accurate, yet his way of putting it slips into the conventional duality between subjective perception and objective phenomena that are perceived. But by distinguishing between naïve simplicity and renewed simplicity he is, I believe, arguing that the Buddhist imagery concerns the direct experience of thusness rather than superficial and naive realism, and the meaning of a poem is that experience rather than some abstract intellectual content.

Buddhist scholar Sallie King is more precise in her explanation of the particular nondualistic "as it is" quality of thusness, as opposed to naïve realism. Thusness "is the conjunction of persons correctly perceiving the world as it is, and the world presenting itself to persons as it is. It is therefore nondualistic – it is prior to a division of experience into the categories of subject and object or mind and world." In the first sentence she resorts to the virtually unavoidable dualism of perception and world perceived, but she also notes that thusness is a conjunction of the two. The second sentence affirms the nonduality of mind and world. She further notes that this nonduality transcends the limits of our language: "the word Thusness is not a term that has the qualities or attributes of being 'this' or 'that'; it is a word by which words are undone, a word that points at our language and indicates that it will not do."[4]

Buddhism as experienced by most of its followers rarely reaches this point. And haiku as practiced by its poets rarely involves this nondualistic experience of thusness. But Bashō takes this as the ultimate ideal, and haiku at its deepest level arises out of such an experience. The images of a poem don't point to an objective world separate from the mind of the poet, nor do they point to the confined subjective mindspace separate from the world of pines and bamboos. They are words at the edge of language functioning to point beyond themselves to the poet's experience of thusness.

The images can function in another way as well: to catalyze such an experience in the reader. Here I would like to adopt some of Kacian's helpful terminology. The words of haiku are indeed "literary triggers." But at their most subtle, they can function not merely to impact subjective emotional mindspace but to prompt the reader's own experience of the thusness of, say, an old pond. And when read this way, these literary triggers can help readers experience thusness in their own life-world after they have put the poem down.

Kacian maintains that "Things as they are—realism—as a goal may exist, but elsewhere, in some realm that is not art, something perhaps like religion." I propose two changes to this statement. First, "things as they are" could be thought of in terms of nondualistic thusness rather than naïve realism based on the mind/reality dualism. And second, I

question the duality between art and religion. What Bashō, Saigyō, and the great Chinese poets and painters produced was both art and profoundly religious. The only way to understand them is to recognize that they presented a religious experience in their art. The result of this revision of Kacian's statement then is: the goal is experiencing thusness in religiously informed art. To learn of the pine from the pine and enter into its subtleties.

Kacian speaks eloquently of the possibilities of expanding our notion of haiku by rejecting a superficial notion of realism. In further enriching both our reading and our writing of haiku, I suggest we also need to remain open to the kind of experience that goes beyond the dualisms of subject/object, mind/reality, and self/world. Certainly few haiku poets have had or will have the depth of realization that Bashō or other great artists of East Asia experienced. Kacian's nuanced call to think of haiku as a sophisticated form of aesthetically and emotionally manipulating the mindspace of readers is certainly a perceptive and valuable frame for reading and writing haiku. But the nondualistic experience of thusness has been an essential part of Buddhist-informed haiku (and tanka before it), and it can be a part of haiku's further development in the West.

Notes

[1] Fuller, Michael A. "Pursuing the Complete Bamboo in the Breast: Reflections on a Classical Chinese Image for Immediacy," *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 53.1 (1993): 10, 16.

[2] My translations.

[3] LaFleur, William R. *Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 23-24.

[4] King, Sallie B. *Buddha Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 102-3, 102.