

REFLECTIONS ON *KOKORO* IN JAPANESE BUDDHIST POETRY

A CASE OF HIEROGLOSSIC INTERACTION

Jean-Noël ROBERT

Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Sciences Religieuses, Paris

In last year's Bulletin, Jean-Noël Robert presented a theoretical analysis of the relationship between sacred and traditional languages on the one hand and religious languages dependent on them for expressing the higher truths of religion. He argued there for a multidisciplinary study of the question, and hinted that he was pursuing a concrete example within Buddhist literature. In this essay he carries the project further another step. We reproduce the article here not only for its intrinsic interest, but also because it relates to the ongoing dialogue on "Science-kokoro-religion" being carried out at the Nanzan Institute and reported on elsewhere in this Bulletin.

Every student of the Japanese language learns early on that most of the time the semantic field of any given word does not overlap with its direct counterpart in Western languages. Still, to my mind at least, it would be wrong to conclude that the languages and cultures of Eurasia, however distant from each other in time and space, are isolated entities that only rarely interact with one another. In this brief essay I will try to show how that the Japanese concept of *kokoro*, for all its unique richness and originality, is actually the result of a long history of crosscultural relations and an almost ideal example of what I called *hieroglossia*, or the hierarchized religious contacts and influences that take place between languages.

This is not the place to discuss the shades of meaning between terms like the Latin *cor*, the English *heart*, or the French *cœur*—to which we may as well add the Greek terms *κῆαρ* and *καρδία*, the Russian *serdce*, and the Gaelic *croí* (old Irish *críde*). Suffice it to say that all these words, belonging to different language families within the Indo-European phylum, stem from a common root, often reconstituted as **kērd*. As this root developed into all the variety of distinct terms just indicated, they somehow managed to keep a clearly recognizable *air*

de famille. I think it safe to assume that this common root had a double meaning: the heart as a physical organ and the heart as a mental organ. This is still the case in the majority of modern European languages.

At the other extreme of the Indo-European sphere, this same root produced the Sanskrit forms *hrd* and *hrdaya* which closely parallel the Greek κέαρ and καρδία. It does not take extensive philological training to perceive the similarity of *hrd* to the English word *heart*. The spread of Buddhism through south-east Asia carried the Sanskrit word, or its Pali cognate, to the Siamese and Cambodian languages almost without change.

Meantime, this same word travelled north to central Asia and eastwards to China, undergoing a rich and strange metamorphosis in the course of the journey. It is common knowledge that the translation of the Buddhist Scriptures and doctrinal treatises, mainly from Sanskrit into Chinese, was not a straightforward process. It lasted for centuries and, contrary to what happened in Tibet where a consistent list of set equivalents for the use of translators was early enough promulgated under royal authority, it was left to the proclivities of different communities and individuals to choose from among an almost endlessly accumulating store of vocabulary. For the sake of brevity, I will speak here of two main methods of conveying basic Indian Buddhist concepts into Chinese. The first, and less common, is phonetic transcription through Chinese characters, where the meaning of the characters is more or less discarded in favor of approximating the sound of an Indic word that is supposedly untranslatable. For example: 涅槃 *nehan* ← *nirvāṇa*, 達磨 *datsuma* ← *dharma*, 刹那 *setsuna* ← *kṣana*. It is worth remarking that there are very good Chinese terms for these words: *jakumetsu* 寂滅 (among others), *hō* 法, and *nen* 念. Indeed, by far the greater part of Chinese vocabulary used in Buddhist texts belongs to this last category, namely pure Chinese words adapted to convey ideas and notions as yet unknown in China. The lack of a systematic catalogue of translation vocabulary reflects the fact that one Chinese word can be used to translate several Indic ones or that several Chinese words are capable of rendering a single Indic one.

Returning to our Sanskrit *hrdaya*, the term is consistently translated in Chinese and only rarely transcribed phonetically. Most translators opted for a single, uniform word to render the Indic word: the character *xīn* (*shin*) 心, an ancient Chinese pictogram intended as a stylized drawing of the heart. As is evident from the primitive form of the character, the pristine meaning is fundamentally the heart as a physical organ. Hence, if we follow most of the good dictionaries, the character carries the meanings of “seat of the mental and spiritual functions” on the one hand, and of “central and essential part,” “kernel, core” (cf. Jpn. *kakushin* 核心) on the other, both in their concrete and figurative meanings. In fact, *hrdaya* is almost an exact match for part of those meanings, viz., the heart as an organ, and the innermost part, the core. This nuance is still very

much alive in Japan through the title of the best-known Buddhist Scripture here, the *Heart Sutra* or *Hannya-shin-gyō*. The mental and psychological aspect of *shin* is not so conspicuous in Sanskrit *hrdaya*, although the sentimental one (“love”) is well attested in compounds like *suhrd* “friend” (“well-loved one”), sometimes translated in Chinese as *shin’yū* 心友 (*shin* written as *kokoro*).

But while the Chinese translators used *shin* to translate *hrdaya*, the very same word was also put to good use for transposing a completely different set of Indic Buddhist terms, the technical meaning of which was clearly distinguished from *hrdaya* and had nothing to do originally with the physical organ. As it would be tedious and beside the point to explain them all here, we may note the three main term: *citta*, *manas*, and *vijñāna*. It is obvious that the three belong to separate roots. Two of them have clear cognates in European languages (Latin *gnoscere*, Greek *gnosis*, English *to know*, for example, for *vi-jñāna*; Latin *mens*, Greek *menos*, English *mind* for *manas*). I would even venture that there is a possible relationship between *citta* and the Slavic root *cit-* (“to read, to count, compute, reflect”). All these words refer not only to psychological functions, but more precisely to cognitive and reflective functions, and as such are connected with rational thought as well.

Thus, through the agency of Chinese translators the one character *shin*, a word already very rich in its own right, came to take on a whole array of Buddhist and Indian psychological conceptions.

It is of some importance at this point to quote a remark, as interesting as it is brief, from one of the most famous and influential Buddhist treatises written by a Chinese author, the *Mohezhi-guan* (Jp. *Maka-shikan*, Eng. *The Great Calming and Contemplation*), one of the three major works of the Tiantai School. In the first chapter of his *summa*, Zhiyi, the sixth century Chinese monk, explains the meaning of the term *bodaishin* (Skt. *bodhicitta*) and distinguishes the two main meanings of *shin* we have just noted: one as the translation of *hrdaya*, the other as the translation of *citta*, only the second of which pertains to the compound *bodaishin* 菩提心. While *citta* is defined as “cognitive mind” 慮知之心 (T. XLVI p. 4A21), *hrdaya* is explained as meaning either the “essential part of any compound” 積聚精要 or the “core of plants” 草木等心, *core* rendering here the same character *shin*. Nothing is said of other meanings of *hrdaya*. The basic sense of *citta* is conveyed succinctly, but it seems rather odd that Zhiyi would chose to restrict his example to plants. (Strictly speaking, the phrase means “the core of things such as plants,” but a cursory reading undoubtedly leaves the impression that plants are essentially what is meant.)

Zhiyi goes on saying that this meaning of *shin* as *hrdaya* is irrelevant 非 to defining the idea of enlightenment and must be left out 簡. One would think the matter ends there, but this is not the case.

After India and China, we may now turn to see how the heart fared in Japan. The Chinese character, already laden with Indian and Buddhist conceptions, was assigned the reading *kokoro* in Japanese from very early on. Although this ancient word seems originally to have referred to the heart as an organ, and thus may have been, like *kimo* (“liver”), one of the very few genuinely Japanese terms of anatomical reference,¹ the fact is that the physical entity quickly gave way to the different mental functions ascribed to the heart. Still—and this is a very special characteristic of what we might call the double articulation of the Japanese writing which blends Chinese characters with Japanese words more or less arbitrarily assigned to those characters—even if the physical meaning of *kokoro* as such has been almost completely obliterated, the Chinese character *shin* to which this reading was ascribed, remains a constant reminder of that meaning, to the extent that most modern Japanese would say that somehow *kokoro* means *shinzō* (the heart as an organ, a medical term), although both words can never be used interchangeably. Such is the power of the Chinese characters.

There is another, inverse aspect to the interaction of the two languages. As I said before, the arbitrary ascription of genuine Japanese words as readings of Chinese characters allows for two different written words to be read as one in Japanese, thus fusing together in this language discrete terms of the other one. An important example is the Chinese character *yì* (Jp. *i*) 意, which has three relevant senses here. First is the more general sense of “mental function,” the working of the spirit and of the intellect. From there it went on to serve as a more precise translation of the Buddhist Sanskrit term *manas* than the looser rendering as *shin*. As an indication of the importance of this usage, we may note that it refers to what we might call “the sixth sense,” the mental faculty that perceives phenomena (*dharma*) in the same way that the ear perceives the sounds and the eye perceives shapes and colors. In this more technical sense, the Chinese texts tend to use exclusively *i* and not *shin*. The third meaning of *i* is none other than “meaning” itself (as in the Sino-Japanese compound *imi* 意味). It can indicate the meaning of a word as well as the sense or true meaning of a poem or the answer to a riddle. As far as I know, this third meaning is conspicuously absent in the Chinese character *shin* when used alone.²

In the following pages I would like to show by way of a few examples how learned Japanese monks and poets were able to make the most of all these different layers of meaning in a particular genre of Japanese classical poetry (*waka*

1. Cf. the poetical expression 肝向ふ心 “the heart facing the liver.”

2. But for lack of time, it would be interesting to digress on some Japanese readings that could be viewed as the same rendering of two different technical terms. An especially interesting example is *kokorone*, that can be derived both from *shinkon* 心根 (from Sanskrit *mūlacitta*) and *ikon* 意根 (from *manendriya*). As a quite ordinary word in colloquial Japanese, it both means one’s innermost feelings and one’s nature or character.

和歌) known as *shakkyō-ka* or *shakkyō no uta*, “poetry on Buddhist topics.” I will chose my examples from a little collection of such Buddhist poems written by one of the most distinguished authors in this genre, Jien (Jichin-daikashō, 1155–1225) who is perhaps more renowned as a scholar than as a poet. This collection, as is obvious from its title *A Hundred Poems on the Essential Texts of the Lotus Sutra*,³ consists of a collection of poems in Japanese (actually there are 144 of them, not 100) based on one hundred quotations from the *Lotus Sutra* in the Chinese version of Kumārajīva. The fascination these poems work on the reader stem from the way the poet roots the ethereal teachings of the *Lotus Sutra* in the reality of the language and landscape of Japan. The subtlety of the dialogue going on between the two languages, Chinese and Japanese, as the latter unfolds the hidden possibilities of the former by means of the rhetorical intricacies of classical Japanese poetry, is a source of endless wonder. In addition to these examples, I will add a few others from another series of poems composed by Jien on one particular teaching from the second chapter of the Sutra, the “Ten Suchnesses” 十如是.⁴

35. *ada no hana | kokoro wo shimete | nagamureba | hotoke*
no yado ni | tomo no miyatsuko

*This transient flower,
if we bring all our heart
in contemplating it,
is our fellow-servant
in Buddha's abode*

Here, *kokoro* means mindfulness, poetical sincerity, and the power of concentration. This can be inferred from the *double entendre* of *nagamu*, which means both “to contemplate” and “to compose poetry”: if the poetical mind is put to good use, then the transient flower, the favorite object of poets, can become the *minori no hana* “the flower of reality,” which is the *Lotus Sutra*.⁵ The scriptural context (the parable of the “prodigal son” in chapter 4 of the Sutra) shows that the flower is expected to attain enlightenment as well as human beings. If we recall that the verb *shimu* also means “to permeate,” it is clear that *kokoro* is not only in the eye of the beholder, but also in the flower itself.

43. *kyō no sora ni | amaneku sosogu | ame no iro ha |*
minabito-goto ni | kokoro ni zo somu

3. 法華要文百首, also known as the 詠法華經百首.

4. There is not time here to explain the technical meaning of this Buddhist term.

5. See my “From Jien to Son'en,” International Research Center for Japanese Studies, International Symposium 18, *Figures and Places of the Sacred*, 157.

*In today's sky
the charm of rain
pouring on the universe
imbues the heart
of each and everyone*

If we compare this poem to the scriptural passage it is meant to develop, we find Jien performing a kind of sensorial transfer in that the *Lotus Sutra* speaks of the “taste” of the rain, not of its “color” (here translated as “charm”). The shift from taste to color allows the poet to play on the concatenation of *iro*, *kokoro*, and *somu* (“color,” “heart,” “dye, imbue, permeate”), a rather frequent poetic device meant here to allude to the charm of the loved one permeating the heart of the lover, but does so by describing the melancholy feeling at the contemplation of flowers blossoming, thus combining love and the spectacle of nature. The chapter in question from the *Lotus Sutra* describes only the beneficial effects of the same rain falling on different kind of plants, a metaphor of the salutary action of the Buddha’s teachings on sentient beings. Here, as in the preceding poem, it is precisely the word *kokoro* that provides the link between the two dimensions, the human and the vegetative.

89. *yoshino-yama | oku no kokoro ni | suminureba | chiru
hana mo naku | saku eda mo nashi*

*When the hermit's heart
in the depths of Yoshino
has been purified,
flowers do not scatter
nor do twigs blossom anymore*

In this description of the effects of Buddhist practice in the mountains of Yoshino, a traditional recess for hermits and poets, the word *kokoro* clearly carries the sense of the discerning and meditating mind and the new state of awareness that is brought about in enlightenment. This poetical amplification of the scriptural words, “There is no more birth or death,” can also be taken as an allusion to the practice of *pratyekabuddha*, but we will not dwell on this aspect here. Let us rather compare the use of *kokoro* in this rather restricted sense to the following poem:

*l.a. yoshino-yama | kumo ka hana ka to | nagamekemu |
yosome ha onaji | kokoro narikeri*

*In the Yoshino Mountains
we may have looked and wondered
if it was clouds or flowers,*

*but beyond diversity
is the same heart*

This poem is composed on the first suchness, the suchness of mark or aspect 如是相, and its purpose is to establish the identity of the phenomenal world with the mind that perceives it. Here the hills of Yoshino are not only the dwelling of hermits, but also a poetical locus exemplifying erroneous perception: from a distance cherry blossoms are taken as snow lingering on the heights. There is no need for doubt or interrogation, however, since all phenomenal diversity is reintegrated in the mind. Here again, *kokoro* is the place of conjunction for outer nature and inner self.

The same idea is expressed in the following verses:

102. *satori-yuku | kokoro no mizu ni | somenureba | ika-
naru iro mo | tagau mono ka ha*

*Since they have been tinged
by the waters of the heart
awakening
will you find a color
divergent from the others?*

The scriptural passage referred to here contains the term “real aspect” and carries much the same idea of the perfect integration of all phenomena in the absolute aspect of reality, said to be one of the most fundamental teachings of the *Lotus Sutra*. “Color” means “phenomena, things as apparent to the eye,” so that in an awakened state the mind permeates every hue of the outer world.

The expression “water of the heart” is intriguing. Coupled with the verb “to awaken,” it renders a certain image of the supreme state of conscience that we find reiterated in the following poem, all the more interesting as the decisive term *kokoro* is conspicuously absent.

11. *natsu no ike ni | moto yori tane no | areba koso | nigori-
nishimanu | hana mo sakurame*

*In the summer pond
since from the beginning
is hiding its germ,
immaculate
will the flower blossom*

The flower to blossom in the pond is, of course, the lotus flower, and therefore by association the *Lotus Sutra*. But this is only one level of meaning, the most obvious one. The argument is too long to reproduce here, but elsewhere I have

shown how the second and third verse are a Japanese paraphrase of a Chinese Buddhist term for the *ālaya-vijñāna* or “store-consciousness,” while the fourth verse is a nice rendering of another technical term referring to an aspect of this consciousness (*amala-vijñāna*).⁶ The pond is a rather well-known metaphor for the heart, so that even though the very word *kokoro* does not itself appear, the whole poem is a description of the heart as the store of Buddha-nature. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that this poem is assigned the caption “suchness of nature” 如是性.

The vegetative image is carried further in this final poem:

*II.a. ki mo kusa mo | ne-tsuki eda-ha mo | kizasu yori | hito
no kokoro no | tane mo sa koso ha*

*Since trees and grass
take root, leaves and branches
grow buds,
the same goes for the germ
in the human heart*

Under the same caption of “suchness of nature” we see here a very explicit parallel drawn between vegetative life, all the more striking in that we have seen how carefully Zhiyi distinguished the mind as the subject of enlightenment from the meaning of the “heart of plants.” We cannot but think that Jien is intending here to reunite what the Master of the Tendai school had separated.

Although the examples have been few and the explanation sparse, I trust it is clear from the above how the richness of *kokoro* as an all-encompassing psychological category is manifest in a very thorough and original way in Japanese Buddhist poetry. I trust, further, that I have made clear that this is not a mere coincidence but was the result of a deliberate effort on the part of the learned monks composing the poetry to tap deeply into the semantic and doctrinal resources of the vocabulary they were using.

As a monk-poet steeped in all the doctrinal subtleties of Tendai and trained in the religious logic of Tendai dogmatics which is loathe to leave a blatant contradiction hanging but aspires always to a final integration or fusion of the opposites, Jien could not rest until he had blended together the two dimensions of *shin* distinguished by Zhiyi at the beginning of its treatise on contemplation. Where *citta* and *hrdaya* (this last term, as you remember, being explained as meaning “the heart of plants”) had been kept separated in *shin*, Jien, making full use of traditional poetical lore, fuses them in *kokoro*.

6. Cf. my 「和歌に依る法華経の解釈」, p. 8, in *Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on Japanese Literature*, Tokyo, 14–15 November, 2002, National Institute of Japanese Literature.

We have here an excellent instance of a complete “hieroglossic” relationship, involving three languages—Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese—and the world-views and psychological conceptions that each of them conveyed, Japanese being the richer for having gathered up at the end the totality of meanings carried by the first two.

The well-known Zen saying 以心傳心 has traditionally been rendered as “transmission from mind to mind.” In the light of the fact that *hrdaya* springs eventually from the same Indo-European root as *heart*, it might be more appropriate to transcribe the phrase in Japanese as *kokoro o motte hāto ni tsutau* 心を以てハートに伝う: “transmission from heart to *kokoro*.”