

Learning to Read Japanese Paintings: Using Art as an Entry Point for Japanese Literature

Background and Resources

By Sarah Campbell, Ketchikan High School

I. Brief Background on Japanese Buddhism

A. Overview

The traditional and indigenous Japanese religion is *Shintō (Way of the Gods)* based on the worship of divine beings called *kami*. The followers of Shintō believe that spiritual powers exist in the natural world. They believe that “spirits” called *kami* live in natural places such as in animals, plants, stones, mountains, rivers, people, and even the dead. Shintō teaches the importance of cleanliness and the sense of guilt if one has embarrassed the family. This tradition emphasized aesthetics and ritual purity but had little ethical component¹.

Buddhism arrived in 538 CE, first from Korea and then China (along with elements of Taoism and Confucianism). Buddhism teaches that desire (for money, glory, love, etc.) traps human beings in an endless cycle of rebirth and suffering; ultimate relief from suffering, however, a state known as enlightenment, can be achieved by eliminating desire. Prince Shotoku (AD 574–621) a regent, who served under Empress Suiko during the Asuka period, is credited with making Buddhism the official state religion and Confucianism the official state philosophy through his 17-Article Constitution (Japanese Buddhism, 2014).

Influential Buddhist schools in Japan of that time included:

- **Esoteric Buddhism:** In the Heian period (8th-12th Centuries), the monk Saicho established Tendai on Mount Hiei near Kyoto. He emphasized a 12-year program of monastic discipline, study, and meditation. This school holds that individuals can achieve enlightenment through their own efforts and stresses ritual meditations (reciting sutras), the contemplation of sacred diagrams of the cosmos (mandalas), etc.²
- **The Pure Land:** The Pure Land School was officially founded by Honen in the 12th Century. He felt that the Tendai path (12-year meditation program) was too difficult for most. He advocated the easier path of the *nembutsu* (chants to show mindfulness of the Buddha and to achieve spiritual awakening). He was disrobed but continued to preach, thus establishing the first Buddhist movement independent of the state. Honen had a follower who emphasized that even the wicked have a chance for salvation. This follower preached that one sincere

¹ <http://www.japanspecialist.co.uk/travel-tips/shinto-buddhism/>

² http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/history_japanese_buddhism.html

recitation of the *nembutsu* was sufficient for salvation. This school became known True Pure Land School.³

- **The Zen Schools: (12th – 13th Century)** There were various Zen schools in medieval Japan; including Rinzai Zen, Soto Zen, and Nichiren Zen. All sects placed emphasis on quiet meditation, reciting sutras, and cultivating the concentration of one's mind.⁴ Zen Buddhism places emphasis on arts (painting, calligraphy, gardening, etc.).

Sources:

“A Guide To Japanese Buddhism.” *Buddha Dharma Education Association*. 2016.

Web. http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/guidejapanbuddhism6.pdf

“History of Japanese Buddhism.” *A View on Buddhism*. Web.

http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/history_japanese_buddhism.html

B. The *Setsumuwa Tales*

These tales featured in Royall Tyler's *Japanese Tales* (1987) date back to the Japanese medieval era (1185-1600). These stories were written for both Esoteric and Pure Land Buddhists. They help illustrate certain points on Buddhism and assisted monks in stressing those points in their sermons. The medieval period in Japan was very chaotic, and many say that people turned to religion as a way to find peace

C. Buddhist Themes in Medieval and Edo Literature

According to Professor Andra Alvis (2005), the following were major Buddhist themes in Medieval and Edo literature:

- **Reincarnation:** How you acted in one life determined your status in the next cycle.
- **Karmic Retribution:** One's moral choices in life have consequences; how one is reborn depends on one's deeds and intentions behind the deeds in a former life.
- **The Impermanence/Mutability of All Things:** Relinquishing desire. Things change so much, one should give them up now and not suffer later. This was a way of persuading people to give up material wants and desires. A subtheme is: *The Uncertainty of the World:* Things happen in bizarre and unpredictable ways.
- **Salvation through Devotion to the Buddha/Buddhist Doctrine:** Giving up everything and pledging allegiance to Buddha.

³ <http://buddhistfaith.tripod.com/beliefs/id9.html>

⁴ “History of Japanese Buddhism.” *A View on Buddhism*. Web.

http://www.viewonbuddhism.org/history_japanese_buddhism.html

D. Buddhist Terminology

Amitabha: In Pure Land Buddhism, the Buddha who presides over the Western Paradise Pure Land. According to Pure Land Buddhism, rebirth into the Western Paradise is attainable through devotion to Amitabha and by calling the name of Amitabha especially at the hour of one's death.

- **Bodhisattva:** In Mahayana Buddhism, a being who strives for the complete enlightenment of a Buddha; bodhisattvas vow not to enter into final nirvana until all living things are released from suffering. To this end, they work to relieve the suffering of others and try to make them aware of the Buddha's teachings. In art, they are more ornately decorated than the Buddha figures.
- **Buddha:** A title meaning "awakened one"; Shakyamuni is often referred to as the "historical Buddha." He is not the first and only Buddha. Maitreya is the name of a future Buddha.
- **Dalai Lama:** In Tibetan Buddhism, the incarnation of the Bodhisattava of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara; also the religious and political leader of Tibet.
- **Dharma:** Buddha's teachings; norms of behavior and ethical rules of Buddhism.
- **Eightfold Path:** In Buddhism, the path that will lead to the release from suffering. The Path consists of three categories: moral conduct, concentration, and wisdom.
- **Enlightenment:** In Buddhism, the experience of true reality, an "awakening" that is believed to enable one to comprehend the true nature of things.
- **Four Noble Truths:** The basis of Buddhist teaching; the truths are (1) life is suffering; (2) suffering is caused by craving; (3) suffering can have an end, and (4) there is a path that leads to the end of suffering.
- **Karma:** The idea that one's moral choices in life have consequences; how one is reborn depends on one's deeds and intentions behind the deeds in a former life.
- **Lotus Sutra:** One of the most important sutras (Buddhist scripture) of Mahayana Buddhism; especially important in China and Japan.
- **Maitreya:** The name of a future Buddha; expected to appear in 30,000 years.
- **Mantra:** A short repetitive incantation or prayer.
- **Meditation:** A general term for a variety of practices in mental concentration, often for the purpose of achieving an "awakening" or "enlightenment."
- **Nirvana:** In Buddhism, the end of the cycle of death and rebirth; the quenching of greed, hatred, and delusion within a person.
- **Pure Land Buddhism:** School of Buddhism devoted to regaining rebirth in the Pure Lands (Buddhist paradises).

- **Reincarnation:** The doctrine that after death, beings are reborn.
- **Shakyamuni:** Founder of Buddhism (490-410 B.C.E.) and a contemporary of Confucius and Laozi.

Source: Reprinted from Waka Takahashi Brown, *Religions and Philosophies in China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism*. Stanford: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, 2002.

Eightfold Path

- | | |
|---|--|
| ➤ Right Understanding: Accept and believe the four noble truths | ➤ Right Effort: Try to improve yourself |
| ➤ Right Speech: Do not say anything hurtful to others. | ➤ Right Action: Do not do anything hurtful to others. |
| ➤ Right Livelihood: Do not perform a job that makes you or others unhappy | ➤ Right Intention: Be determined to follow the eightfold path. |
| ➤ Right Concentration: Learn self-responsibility, focus through meditation. | |
| ➤ Right Mindfulness: Be determined to end selfish ways. | |

(Dharmathai—Thai Buddhism, 2009)

Source: Reprinted from Waka Takahashi Brown. *Religions and Philosophies in China: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism*. Stanford: Stanford Program on International and Cross-Cultural Education, 2002.

E. Symbolism in Buddhist Literature

Colors and the lotus flower are common symbols in Buddhist literature, as described below.

- **Colors**
 - Blue: Coolness, infinity, healing and purity.
 - Black: Darkness, hate.
 - White: Learning, knowledge, purity, longevity.
 - Red: Life force, preservation, blood, fire.
 - Green: Balance, harmony, vigor, youth, action.
 - Yellow: Rootedness, earth, renunciation.

Source: "Buddhist Symbols." *ReligionFacts.com*. 10 Nov. 2015. Web. Accessed 19 Jan. 2016. <www.religionfacts.com/buddhism/symbols>

➤ **Lotus Flower**

- White Lotus: represents the spiritual perfection and total mental purity.
- Pink Lotus: This is the supreme lotus, generally reserved for the highest deity. Thus, it is naturally associated with the Great Buddha himself.
- Red Lotus: Signifies the original nature and purity of the heart. It is the lotus of love, compassion, passion, and all other qualities of the heart.
- Blue Lotus: This is a symbol of the victory of the spirit over the senses, signifying wisdom and knowledge.

Source: "lotus." *ReligionFacts.com*. 10 Nov. 2015. Web. Accessed 19 Jan. 2016.
<www.religionfacts.com/lotus>

II. Student Activities for Medieval and Modern Japanese Literature

A. Using *Setсуwa Tales* in the Classroom

A good source for these tales for use in secondary classrooms is *Japanese Tales* (Tyler, 1987). I recommend the following stories: Stories 105, “The Grateful Turtle”; 107, “The Grateful Crab”; 133, “She Died Long Ago”; and 149, “Incorrigible.”

Suggested questions for student discussion and writing assignments:

- Overall, what seems to be the point of the *Setсуwa Tales*? Please discuss at least two stories and focus your written response on the point/message in each of the two tales discussed.
- What parallels could one draw between events in these stories and life in contemporary America?
- In what ways do these stories have a timeless or “universal” appeal?
- Identify and explain the Buddhist theme(s) present in each of the stories listed below.
 - “The Grateful Turtle”
 - “Incorrigible”
 - “She Died Long Ago”
 - “No Compromise”
- Write your own modern version of the *Setсуwa* Buddhist tales. Quickly brainstorm an idea for a story. Begin first by establishing the purpose of your story—that is, what do you want readers to learn from your tale? Try to craft your story after one of the Buddhist themes we discussed and analyzed. Finally, sketch out an idea for your own tale.

B. Using “Spider’s Thread” by Akutagawa Ryunosuke

The story, “The Spider’s Thread,” by Akutagawa, Ryunosuke, is excellent for classroom use. This story is available in Kojima Takashi (1962). The full text is also available online (as of January 2016) at: https://isistatic.org/journal-archive/ma/01_02/ryunosuke.pdf.

Suggested questions for student discussion and writing assignments:

- Compare/contrast. In a T-chart, contrast the beauty of Paradise with the grotesque images of hell in “The Spider’s Thread.”
- Describe Kandata’s good deed.
- In what way did Kandata put his wicked ways to good use when given the chance?
- What made Kandata give up faith and confidence as he neared the top of the climb?
- What connections can you make between the events of the story and Buddhist beliefs?

- Discuss the color imagery in “The Spider’s Thread.”

C. Using “The Third Night” by Natsume Soseki

“The Third Night” is available in print (Natsume 2001) as well as online (as of January 2016):

- **Online translation #1** by Takumi Kashima and Loretta R. Lorenz:
<http://ptchanculto.binhoster.com/books/-Lit-%20Recommended%20Reading/Japanese%20Literature/Soseki,%20Natsume/Soseki,%20Natsume%20-%20Ten%20Nights'%20Dreams.pdf>
- **Online translation #2** by a novice, anonymous blogger:
http://ubookworm.blogspot.com/2004/10/ten-nights-dreams-oseki-natsume-3_13.html

Because multiple translations are available, students can compare two or more translations, focusing particularly on the wording of the last sentence of “The Third Night.” Suggested questions for discussion and writing include:

- How does the tone vary in each translation?
- Which translator communicates the strongest image?
- What effect do the phrases “I realized for the first time,” “as soon as I started to become aware,” and “at that moment, when I knew” have on each translation?
- Which translation best demonstrates the Buddhist theme of karmic retribution?
- The main character carries a child on his back. As he walks along a path, the child begins to morph into something else all together, and some translators interpret this figure to be a *Jizo*. “*Jizo* is a deity of compassion and benevolence⁵.” Ask students to explore the significance of the main character carrying the heavy weight of a deity. Why would a murderer being carrying the God of compassion? Is there a Buddhist message here?

D. Using “Bears of Nametoko,” by Miyazawa Kenji

This contemporary short story is available in print (Miyazawa 2002) and online, as of January 2016:

<https://books.google.com/books?id=VWfJkFfyBn0C&pg=PA103&lpg=PA103&dq=miyazawa+kenji+the+bears+of+nametoko&source=bl&ots=1VUghf0Uvg&sig=YHKYX76lDySeMEVKKRcPh9Q2ZWE&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiNuf3ujpvKAhVFk5QKH>

⁵ Hammer, Elizabeth. “Buddhism in Japan.” *Asia Society*. 2016. Web.
<http://asiasociety.org/Buddhism-japan>.

[YE6DxgQ6AEIUzAI#v=onepage&q=miyazawa%20kenji%20the%20bears%20of%20nametoko&f=false](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onepage&q=miyazawa%20kenji%20the%20bears%20of%20nametoko&f=false)).

Suggested question for student discussion and writing assignment:

- It has been said that Kojuro's journey in the story could represent the Eightfold Path. Retrace Kojuro's experiences to explore this notion by completing the chart below.

Eightfold Path	Definition – reference Buddhist Lecture notes to define each term	Explanation of how each element is executed or <i>not</i> executed by Kojuro throughout the story
Right Speech		
Right Action		
Right Livelihood		
Right Efforts		
Right Mindfulness		
Right Concentration		
Right Thought		
Right Understanding		

III. Sources Cited in the Class App, “Learning to Read Japanese Paintings: Using Art as an Entry Point for Japanese Literature”

TEA will update these from the final ppt.

Andra, Alvis, Buddhist Themes in Literature. Lecture on Medieval and Edo Literature. Indiana University Teaching East Asia Workshop. Bloomington, IN, 2005.

Hammer, Elizabeth. “Buddhism in Japan.” *Asia Society*. 2016. Web.
<http://asiasociety.org/Buddhism-japan>.

Tyler, Royall, trans. *Japanese Tales: Stories 105, 107, 133, & 149*. New York: Pantheon, 1987.

Winter Landscape, by Sesshū Tōyō. Image of painting in the Tokyo National Museum. Wikimedia.org. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:SesshuShuutouTou.jpg>

File:Dharma Wheel Rotating.svg.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dharma_Wheel_Rotating.svg

Hiroshige-II-Miracle-Stories-of- Kannon-Temple-10--The-Miraculous-Story-of-the-Goddess-of-Mercy. Toshidama Gallery. http://www.toshidama-japanese-prints.com/item_249/Kunisada-Hiroshige-II-Miracle-Stories-of-Kannon-Temple-10--The-Miraculous-Story-of-the-Goddess-of-Mercy.htm

Hiroshige-II-Miracle-Stories-of- Kannon-Temple-10--The-Miraculous-Story-of-the-Goddess-of-Mercy. Toshidama Gallery [http://www.toshidama-japanese-prints.com/full/Kunisada_ & Hiroshige II Miracle Kannon Temple 10 D.jpg](http://www.toshidama-japanese-prints.com/full/Kunisada_&_Hiroshige_II_Miracle_Kannon_Temple_10_D.jpg)

“The Spider’s Thread.” In Akutagawa Ryunokse. *Tales Grotesque and Curious*. Glenn Shaw, trans. <http://www.amazon.com/Grotesque-Curious-Hokuseidos-Japanese-literature/dp/B00085G15A>

A roadside Jizo, photographed by Tanakawho, of Tokyo, Japan. Wikimedia.org. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Jizo#/media/File:Jizo_with_coins.jpg.

References

Alvis, Andra. Lecture on Medieval and Edo Literature. Indiana University Teaching East Asia Workshop. Bloomington, IN, 2005.

Dharmathai—Thai Buddhism. Dharma Thai Theravada Forest Tradition Buddhism, 2009. <http://www.dharmathai.com/dhamma-blog/eightfold-path>.

Japanese Buddhism. Japan Buddhist Federation, 2004. http://www.buddhanet.net/nippon/nippon_partI.html.

Miyazawa, Kenji. “The Bears of Nametoko.” *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*. Ed. Theodore W. Goosen. New York: Oxford UP, 2002, 103.

Natsume, Soseki. “The Third Night.” *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*. Ed. Theodore W. Goosen. New York: Oxford UP, 2002, 28.

Tyler, Royall, trans. *Japanese Tales*. New York: Pantheon, 1987.