

4-2004

## Review of: *Awesome Nightfall: The Life, Times, and Poetry of Saigyō*

Michiko Yusa

Western Washington University, [michiko.yusa@wwu.edu](mailto:michiko.yusa@wwu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl\\_facpubs](https://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl_facpubs)



Part of the [Japanese Studies Commons](#), and the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Yusa, Michiko, "Review of: *Awesome Nightfall: The Life, Times, and Poetry of Saigyō*" (2004). *Modern & Classical Languages*. 13.  
[https://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl\\_facpubs/13](https://cedar.wwu.edu/mcl_facpubs/13)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Humanities at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern & Classical Languages by an authorized administrator of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact [westerncedar@wwu.edu](mailto:westerncedar@wwu.edu).

gage” picture of Buddhism constructed by early western Buddhologists, implicitly suggesting that scholars can extract this original tradition from later cultural accretions. Thus, while Mitchell is by no means uncritical in his analysis of traditional historical claims, he sometimes blurs distinctions between these claims and those which can be verified by critical historical study. He presents, for example, a concise account of the scholarly debates surrounding the rise of the Mahāyāna, but offers the crucial story of Hui-neng “as is,” with no indication of the important critical scholarship on this narrative—scholarship that has had a real impact on the contemporary understanding of the history and doctrines of Ch’an and Zen.

Mitchell’s choices in the presentation of modern trends in Buddhism reflect specific interests rather than an attempt to account for the overwhelming diversity of recent forms of Buddhism. The chapter on modern Buddhist movements in Asia focuses almost exclusively on those “concerned with the physical, social, and political as well as the mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of human existence”—that is, Engaged Buddhism (p. 283). While he explicitly steers away from discussing “nationalist or fundamentalist” movements, he does mention the entanglement of Zen and Japanese nationalism, although he mistakenly attributes it exclusively to the Rinzai school.

Every text purporting to be an introduction to Buddhism must face certain built-in challenges owing to Buddhism’s long history and dazzling diversity. Mitchell makes it clear in his introductory chapter that he is focusing primarily on texts and doctrinal issues. Those whose courses have more of an anthropological bent, or who are concerned with redressing the historical bias toward textual accounts of Buddhism, will find this approach unsatisfying. If, however, you are in need of a text that introduces Buddhist textual traditions or if you emphasize philosophy in your course—and certainly these should not be neglected—you would be hard-pressed to find a better introduction than this one. Perhaps the ideal use of this book would be in conjunction with other works illustrating the anthropological facets of Buddhism. All told, this is a work that does what it does superbly and is one of the best of its kind.

*Awesome Nightfall: The Life, Times, and Poetry of Saigyō.* By William R. LaFleur. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2003. Pp. ix + 173. Paper \$14.95.

Reviewed by **Michiko Yusa** Western Washington University

A quarter of a century ago William LaFleur published his book on Saigyō, *Mirror for the Moon*, which the present work, *Awesome Nightfall: The Life, Times, and Poetry of Saigyō*, thoughtfully and masterfully supersedes. In this connection I may mention the philosopher, Nishida Kitarō, whose *Zen no kenkyū* (An inquiry into the good) was reprinted in 1936, twenty-five years after its first publication. On that occasion Nishida, deeply moved by the thought that his earliest work was still being read, expressed his sentiment by quoting the last two lines of one of Saigyō’s poems:

Toshitakete  
mata koyubeshito  
omoikiya  
Inochi narikeri  
Saya no Nakayama

Did I ever imagine  
In my advanced age  
I should cross once again  
This mountain pass of Saya-no-Nakayama?  
Ah, it is all thanks to having lived a long life!<sup>1</sup>

(Saigyō composed this poem on going for the second time to Mutsu, the northern region of Japan, forty-two years after his first visit there.)

As LaFleur notes, a number of important works on Saigyō's life and his times have been published in Japan in the last two decades, which these offer us more complete sketches of his life and allow an appreciation of his poetry to a greater depth. In the first part of the book, "The Life and Times of Saigyō," the author succinctly incorporates many of these findings and relates Saigyō's poems both to historical events and to his personal life experience (pp. 1–70). The second half of the book contains LaFleur's translation of over 150 poems by Saigyō, all of which appear to be taken from his earlier book (pp. 73–152).

LaFleur shows how Saigyō's life (1118–1190) was closely linked to the historical context. The time was fast changing from the *insei* system (political administration run by the court of the retired emperor) to the Hōgen and Heiji Disturbances, the fierce power struggle between the Taira and the Minamoto military clans, with the dramatic demise of the former and the end of the Heian period. Saigyō's path crossed with such eminent political figures as Taira no Kiyomori in 1172 and Minamoto no Yoritomo in 1186. By juxtaposing historical events with Saigyō's poems, which often bear headnotes describing the circumstances under which he composed them, a full-fledged biography of Saigyō promises to be in the offing.

In the present work, LaFleur sketches Saigyō's life in bold strokes and introduces new findings for the English-reading audience, such as the homoeroticism that dominated the court of the retired Emperor Toba (1103–1156)—although Saigyō himself does not appear to have been a member of this coterie.<sup>2</sup> LaFleur also draws our attention to the fact that Saigyō practiced religious austerities at Mt. Kōya and Ōmine (pp. 20–21). Going beyond a rather two-dimensional image of Saigyō as a nature-loving poet of the moon and the flowers, the present study presents a picture of a man caught in an impossible love affair; a highly skilled equestrian, archer, and *kemari* (a sort of kickball) player; and a man who caused a sensation by renouncing the world at the young age of twenty-three despite his promising career as an imperial guard. Saigyō's mental and physical strength, honed by his mountain asceticism, no doubt was essential in his making extensive journeys far and wide. We also see that the distance Saigyō created from the political arena by becoming a monk gave him a keener eye to assess the fundamental political changes that were then taking

place. The full import of his poems, dealing with warfare, emperors, and the court, cannot be understood when separated from the political events of the day, although Saigyō himself maintained his cool objectivity and distanced himself from them.

The tantalizing speculation that Saigyō was infatuated with Empress Taikenmon'in, Emperor Toba's consort and Emperor Sutoku's mother, is highly probable. When Taikenmon'in renounced the world and became a nun in 1142, Saigyō took part in the Buddhist ceremony and, together with Fujiwara no Shunzei, composed a series of poems on the theme of the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>3</sup> He preserved his friendships, even after the empress passed away, by exchanging poems with her former ladies-in-waiting, and thereby he maintained his ties, albeit indirectly, with the court.

A symbolic importance is attached to the fact that, while he was residing at Futami, near Ise, the center of Shinto worship, Saigyō heard the news of the temporary relocation of the imperial court to Fukuhara (1180) and the breaking out of the hostilities between the Taira and the Minamoto. And while residing near the Ise Shrine—the tutelage shrine of the imperial family—he bore witness to the shift of political power from the imperial court to the military hegemony. By all accounts, it appears that Saigyō was a “royalist” and sided with the court, scorning the rise to power of the military houses. Poems he composed at Ise and its vicinity reveal his ardent support of the imperial family. The syncretism espoused by the Shingon sect in the identification of Amaterasu with the cosmic Buddha essence, Vairocana—the theory of *honji suijaku* (assimilation of Buddhas and local gods or kami)—seems to have provided Saigyō with a perfect justification for his being a Buddhist monk and yet remaining a staunch supporter of the court. Moreover, one gets the sense that the act of composing poetry was for Saigyō a way of offering prayer to the imperial rule.

In Saigyō's day it was believed necessary that for the imperial family to continue to rule the land, the sacred palace (*Saigū*) in which resided the unmarried imperial princess as the “august cane” to the Sun Goddess Amaterasu, had to be properly maintained. When Princess Junshi, who was serving Amaterasu at the sacred palace, fell ill while in office and died on May 5, 1172, Kujō Kanezane, Minister of the Right, wrote in his journal, *Gyokuyō*: “The kami have abandoned our country!”<sup>4</sup> Saigyō appears to have closely shared this apprehension for the future of imperial rule, and prayed for the enduring presence of the kami spirit as the protector of the imperial family.

As sketchily shown above, LaFleur's present book opens up fascinating and important questions on many fronts, and as such this volume will be an interesting choice for seminars on Japanese medieval literature, history, or religion.

Saigyō's poems compiled in the collection *Sanka-shū* are translated by Burton Watson as well, and the reader is in a happy position to read LaFleur's and Watson's translations side by side and appreciate different nuances and interpretations that the translators introduce. For instance, the earlier poem quoted by Nishida is translated by LaFleur as:

Little did I guess  
I'd ever pass so many years . . .  
or even this mountain  
again, in one, now long, life:  
here on Mount Dead-o'-Night. (p. 57)

And Burton Watson renders it as:

Did I ever think  
in old age  
I would cross it again?  
So long I've lived,  
Saya-between-the-Hills.<sup>5</sup>

#### Notes

- 1 – Michiko Yusa, *Zen and Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), p. 281; translation slightly modified.
- 2 – Gomi Fumihiko, *Inseiki shakai no kenkyū* (A study of the cloistered Imperial Court) (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1984), pp. 416–441.
- 3 – Tsunoda Bun'ei, *Taikenmon'in Tamako [or Shōshi] no shōgai* (The life of the Imperial Mother, Taikenmon'in Shōshi) (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 1985), pp. 260–261, 274–275.
- 4 – Kubota Jun, *Sankashū* (The mountain-hut collection) (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1983), p. 255.
- 5 – Burton Watson, *Saigyō: Poems of a Mountain Home* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 209.

*Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*. By James W. Heisig. Nanzan Library of Asian Religion and Culture. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001. Pp. xi + 380. \$21.95.

Reviewed by **Robert E. Carter** Professor Emeritus, Trent University

*Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School*, by James W. Heisig, is indeed a very good book. It provides a systematic interpretation and appraisal of the three key figures of the Kyoto school—Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji—together with an in-depth account of the sociopolitical context in which they worked. Heisig succeeds in indicating the importance of each of these philosophers both within the Japanese context and beyond. He deftly summarizes the philosophical positions of each of the three and details the interactions between them, as well as with other philosophers of their era. The book's style is accessible, although the ideas are often dense and the analysis subtle. There are no footnotes per se, but instead a bibliographical essay is provided for each of the sixty-six sections of the book.