

THE BUTTERFLY AND THE MUSHROOM

Mark Unno, *Shingon Refractions: Myoe and the Mantra of Light*.
Boston, MA, Wisdom Publications, 2004.

Myoe Koben (1173–1232) was born into the Yuasa family in the Arita district of Kii, Japan. He was ordained into two Buddhist sects: Kegon, the Japanese version of the Chinese Hua-yen, and Shingon, a tantric sect related in spirit to the Tibetan Vajrayana. He also practiced *zazen*, Zen meditation, which scholar of religions George J. Tanabe, Jr., in his book on Myoe, misrepresents as a practice one does “to have visions.”¹ In fact, according to Eihei Dogen, the great Zen Master and philosopher who was Myoe’s contemporary, the purpose of *zazen* is to “drop body and mind.” Nevertheless, Myoe’s soteriological practices seem to have had a more visionary intention.

A scholarly monk, Myoe wrote over fifty works in several genres, including philosophical treatises, letters, travel journals, and poetry. Although Myoe was abbot of Kozanji, a Kegon monastery, Mark Unno points out that Myoe devoted the last decade of his life to Shingon Buddhism’s “Mantra of Light.” Under the title, *The Sutra of the Mantra of the Unfailing Rope Snare of the Buddha Vairocana’s Great Baptism*, the mantra was brought to Japan from China around 300 years before Myoe’s birth. But it was he who brought it into practice.

I first learned of Myoe when, in the early 1990s, I came across Hayao Kawai’s *The Buddhist Priest Myoe: A Life of Dreams*.² It attracted me because a Buddhist priest who paid attention to his dreams (even analyzed them!) seemed out of sync with the Zen School of Buddhism, with which I was most familiar. Kawai’s introduction to Myoe came from a different direction. In a subsequent book, Japan’s first Jungian analyst wrote, “When I became a Jungian analyst, I found it virtually unthinkable that I ever would become deeply interested in Buddhism. I had been vaguely rejecting Buddhism since my childhood.”³ Instead, he had turned toward the West, regretting that he was unable to find a Japanese teacher on the level of C. G. Jung. “But when I read Myoe’s dream diary, I felt that I had finally been able to find one.”⁴ Like Kawai not being able to find a Japanese teacher comparable to C. G. Jung, Myoe complained about being born in Japan instead of in the birthplace of the Buddha. He, too, looked west. “Ah,” he lamented, “what has become of Buddhist practice in the land, so remote from India, in these deprived Latter Days?”⁵ Yet, every time he planned to travel there, something went wrong. Although among Western scholars Myoe is best known for his “Chronicle of Dreams” (*Yume no ki*), which he kept for about thirty-five years, Mark Unno paints a broader picture, one that traces Myoe’s place in Japanese Buddhism back to the mythical Buddha, Vairocana, “the most cosmic expression of this vast web of interpenetration.”⁶

Traditionally, Vairocana is gender neutral. But for Myoe, a celibate monk who didn’t hide the sublimation of his strong desires for women, Vairocana is projected as female. In his self-analyses of his erotic dreams, women, “mythical, semilegendary, and human—while delineating distinct representations of gender, flow in and through one another in the confluence of religions, erotic, social, and political forces that coalesce and congeal in (Myoe’s rendering of) the Mantra of Light.”⁷

Throughout this book, Unno describes and translates rituals that use the Mantra of Light, such as the “Ritual of Empowering the Sand.” Chanting the mantra one hundred and eight times over the sand, then sprinkling it on the corpse, or the grave, of sinners, will cause, Myoe believed, the souls of sinners to be reborn in the Pure Land (Heaven). But what is the “sand” to which Myoe refers?

In Unno’s translation of “Recommending Faith in the Sand of the Mantra of Light,” Myoe explains that these grains of sand “differ in color, being blue, yellow, and so on; likewise, they differ in shape, being rectangular, round and so on. [Together] they form a mass of tiny, hard [particles]. This is called ‘sand.’”⁸ Then Myoe carries this forth in the form of questions and answers, expertly opening the mantra to his followers.

There is so much worth elaborating here! Navaho and Tibetan healing practices with sand paintings; the Jewish ritual in which sand from the Holy Land is tossed onto the coffin just before the grave is closed; Malekulan sand-tracings that figure “The Path” drawn by a Female Devouring Ghost; Sandplay Therapy, which Hayao Kawai introduced to the Japanese general public, supplementing “the tradition of *bonkei* [tray scenes] and *hako niwa* [small sandbox gardens].”⁹ However, it is another, less tactile, more philosophical chapter in Unno’s book that I’d like to explore. Titled *The Butterfly and the Mushroom: The Illusion of Reality and the Reality of Illusion*, here Unno compares the famous butterfly dream of Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu) with a “remarkable event” in Myoe’s essay, “Recommending Faith.”

This is the jist of Myoe’s rendition. One of the monks living at Kozanji became intoxicated after eating some mushrooms. After he awoke, he said that the novice monk who picked the mushrooms and gave them to him had come to the monastery with his mother, who would not leave his side. The monk told him that he should return to home with his mother, but he refused to leave. Myoe called this “a remarkable event,” because,

Although he was affected by the mushrooms and fell ill both mentally and physically, why would a monk have picked the mushrooms and come to his side? And even if the monk had been seen picking the mushrooms (as a monk is someone who has left home), why would his mother be at his side?¹⁰

Myoe’s first thought is that,

Although one might be an ignorant monk full of doubt and stupidity (he is humbly referring to himself), one can come to know the principle of Buddhism through hearing of such events and be influenced by the virtuous mind and heart of the Tathagata.

Deeply influenced by the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness, *sunyata*, Myoe takes the path of nonself, “the real nature [of things],” as the correct way to be cured of the mushrooms. From here he launches his inquiry into “the origin of this intoxicated mind.”¹¹ At this point, I must supply the crux of Zhuangzi’s well-known dream, which Unno plays with and against Myoe’s story:

One day Zhuangzi dreams he is a butterfly. However, in this dream there is no Zhuangzi; that is, there is no dream-ego, only the butterfly. Suddenly, he wakes up and is Zhuangzi again. But now he isn’t sure if he had dreamt he was a butterfly, or if he’s a butterfly who is dreaming he is Zhuangzi.

In his comparison of Myoe’s tale of a monk’s “intoxication” from mushrooms with Zhuangzi’s oneiric transubstantiation into a butterfly, Unno says that, whatever else one might say about these passages, there are certain striking similarities in the ways that Zhuangzi and Myoe circumscribe the relationship between language, distinctions made in waking reality, and the deeper truth that calls these distinctions into question. Specifically, both Zhuangzi and Myoe see the distinctions of ordinary waking reality as illusionary and therefore questionable.¹²

Myoe likens interrogating reality by harnessing the power of paradox, even virtue, to becoming intoxicated by psychotropic mushrooms. This reveals just how radical thirteenth century Asian spirituality could be. Zhuangzi plays on the threshold between dreaming and waking, where what we call reality is continuously shifting. Myoe’s intoxicated monk is in somewhat the same state, as his recovery depends upon awakening from the mushroom’s delusions, which will happen “only by becoming more intimately aware of the mushroom’s reality ...”¹³ However, as the mushroom is also an illusion, so are the delusions it creates. Now we can see how the dilemma of Myoe’s monk is related to that of Zhuangzi and his butterfly. Both are trying to awake from a dream within a chrysalis made of dreams.

Enlightenment is a metaphor for spiritual maturity:

I had learned in the meanwhile that the greatest and most important problems of life are all in a certain sense insoluble. They must be so because they express the necessary polarity inherent in every self-regulating system. They can never be solved, but only outgrown.¹⁴

To add spice to the plot, the butterfly is an ancient symbol for the psyche, and the psychotropic mushroom “is actually an androgynous shape-shifting deity that can take various forms relative to the predisposition of the culture encountering it.”¹⁵ Unno now elucidates the problem of Zhuangzi’s skepticism over the ability of language to reveal the Dao (Tao). This is not only an ancient philosophical problem, but is also the fulcrum of poststructuralist thinkers, who contend that the signifier and what it signifies are not directly linked, thus “bracketing” language’s, or any sustainable truth’s, relationship to reality. To my mind, Zhuangzi’s hermeneutical approach is more rigorous. His concern is: “If he were to assert that language cannot grasp reality, then he would be caught in the very language of ‘this’ versus ‘that.’”¹⁶ Instead, he unifies himself with the flux of things.

The viscosity of language also poses a problem for psychoanalysis, whose “talking cure” depends on the veracity of words to reach a working solution to the patient’s neurosis. If words can’t be relied on, what is the point of such analyses? For therapeutic purposes, ways out of this dilemma have been found, such as Archetypal Psychology’s technique of working directly with a dream’s images.

What kind of theory could we construct, when we can’t describe, let alone define, the basic terms of our vocabulary? ... we must grapple with each dream bare-handed, daring our way through from image to image solely by means of our imaginative craft and consistent viewpoint, without theoretical goals saying how it should come out and when the engagement is over.¹⁷

It is interesting to point out here that Myoe says nothing about the content of the monk’s hallucinations, which is where a psychologist’s approach would begin. He is only interested in uncovering the “fundamental ignorance” that the dreaming mind, in its “three realms and four phases (arising, abiding, changing and perishing)” projects.¹⁸

There are many linguistically oriented therapeutic processes; but when it comes to spirituality, the conundrum remains: language’s barrier is also a door. “Thus,” Unno says, “the problem is not with language but with the mode of logic and with (Zhuangzi’s) mind. Not with *his* mind, actually, but with the mind of the reader.”¹⁹ In addition, as Zhuangzi’s text was written in ancient Chinese ideographs, Unno examines several translations, in order to show that even though their logic differs, ranging from the “flatly declarative” to the “conjectural or ironic,” they are all acceptable within the protean syntax of Chinese linguistics.

Doku, the term translated as “intoxicating,” can also mean “poison.” It is used here in both senses. “This ambiguity in meaning is crucial to understanding the mushroom episode, much like the ambiguity of Zhuangzi’s sense that there must be some distinction (but maybe not!).”²⁰ The butterfly is both him and not him; also, neither him nor not him. A Zen Master was asked how to avoid the heat of the fire (illusion). He replied, “Jump into the middle of it.” It is the same with the mushroom. One must allow oneself to be intoxicated by the drug of Buddhist teachings, risk one’s sanity by ingesting the poison of its words, “in order to see that all distinctions, including those of the Buddhist teachings themselves, are provisional and illusory, no matter how powerful they are as expressions of highest truth.”²¹

This is a physic for the fundamentalisms of any religious, political, philosophical, scientific, or psychological belief-system. When we enter the “dreamlike world of butterflies and mushrooms,

where rigid distinctions are called into question (and) dissolved ... language is also renewed, and the one who embodies the Way speaks with a new voice, attuned to the subtle illusion of reality and the complex reality of illusion."²²

From here Unno moves on to contrast Zhuangzi with Myoe. Where Zhuangzi surrenders to wonder and mystery, Myoe leans on faith in the Buddhadharmā (the Buddha's teachings). While Myoe traces the mushroom incident along a sequence of karmic events, beginning with the monk's mother giving birth to him, and ending with the older monk's illness from eating the mushroom the young monk gave him, the Chinese sage is not interested in cause and effect but harmony with the universal flow of phenomena. Myoe worships the Buddha as an intimate—"Oh great mother, dear mother," he chants, in his propensity for an androgynous deity, while Zhuangzi's focus is "on the impersonal transformation of things."²³

However, Myoe's Buddhist faith should not be equated with the faith of Evangelical Christians, whose God "so transcends the human realm that no human agency can possibly bridge the gap."²⁴ Although Buddhism incorporates "The Mantra of Light and the sand empowered by this mantra," it is also "the responsibility of the individual practitioner to eradicate his own evil karma."²⁵ Faith may be the beginning of one's practice, but it eventually comes down to hard sacrificial work.

Myoe's traditionalism shadows Zhuangzi's suspicion of institutional (Confucian) hierarchy. Myoe sees the problem within the person, while Zhuangzi "sees the spiritual malaise and moral chaos of his day residing primarily ... external to the individual in the sense that it is adventitious and not a problem intrinsic to human nature."²⁶

Centuries later, C. G. Jung wrote that he found that the knowledge of people who "grew beyond themselves ... never came exclusively either from within or from without. If it arose from outside, it became a deeply subjective experience; if it arose from within, it became an outer event."²⁷ The mushroom, which manifested in the mundane world, was eaten and absorbed into the monk's bloodstream where, slipping past the blood-brain barrier, it activated a "fluid dreamlike" hallucinatory state of consciousness. Originating as a dream, the butterfly fluttered its oneiric wings and, like the actor in Woody Allen's film, "The Purple Rose of Cairo," walks out of its two-dimensional world to join a woman in three-dimensions, flying into the solid state of phenomenal reality.

For scholars and general readers interested not only in Far Eastern Studies but also Consciousness Studies, Transcendental Psychology and the spectrum of Jungian Studies, with accessible writing and translations, *Shingon Refractions* elucidates the arcane world of religion in Japan's Kamakura Period, and Myoe Koben's exposition of the Mantra of Light.

ENDNOTES

1 George Tanabe, Jr., *Myoe the Dreamkeeper*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University, Council on East Asian Studies, 1992, 59.

2 Hayao Kawai, *The Buddhist Priest Myoe: A Life of Dreams* (trans. Mark Unno), Venice, CA, Lapis Press, 1992.

3 Hayao Kawai, *Buddhism and the Art of Psychotherapy*. College Station, TX, Texas A&M University Press, 1996, 11.

4 Kawai, *Buddhism and Art of Psychotherapy*, 30.

5 Rebecca Ramus, "The Sayings of Myoe Shonin Yuikun," *Eastern Buddhist*, 15:1, Spring, 1992, 87–105.

6 Unno, 57.

7 Unno, 133.

8 Unno, 234.

9 Kawai, *Buddhism and Art of Psychotherapy*, 28.

10 Unno, 89, 90.

- 11 Unno, 89–91.
- 12 Unno, 91.
- 13 Unno, 92.
- 14 C. G. Jung, *Commentary on The Secret of the Golden Flower* (trans. Richard Wilhelm), New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962, 90, 91.
- 15 Terrence McKenna, *The Archaic Revival*. San Francisco, CA, HarperSan Francisco, 1991, 152.
- 16 Unno, 93.
- 17 James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, New York, Harper & Row, 1979, 195.
- 18 Unno, 90.
- 19 Unno, 93.
- 20 Unno, 96.
- 21 Unno, 97.
- 22 Unno, 98.
- 23 Unno, 101.
- 24 R. Kornman, “Have a Nice Day, Go to Hell,” Review of Madasamy Thirumalai’s *Sharing Your Faith With a Buddhist*, *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner’s Quarterly*, Fall 2004, 77.
- 25 Unno, 101.
- 26 Unno, 102.
- 27 Jung, 92.