Myôe’s Moon  Aka-aka ya

Olof G. Lidin

In his Nobel Lecture in Stockholm in connection with the Nobel price in literature 1968 Kawabata Yasunari quoted Abbot Myôe’s (明惠 1173-1232) moon poem that reads:

Aka-aka ya
Aka-aka-aka ya
Aka-aka ya
Aka-aka-aka ya
Aka-aka ya tsuki

It is understandable that the audience, consisting mainly of members of the upper literary circle of Sweden, looked in astonishment at this repetition of the word aka. They were hardly more enlightened by professor Edward Seidensticker’s translation of the same poem:

Bright bright, and bright
Bright, bright and bright, bright.
Bright, bright, and bright,
Bright moon.

In this poem the word ‘bright’ is as repeated as often as the word ‘aka’ in Myôe’s poem. Aka means ‘bright’. Both words extol the moon and its light.

Kawabata Yasunari loved this poem and his calligraphic rendering of the same he used for friends and acquaintances. See below a copy of the same:
Myôe was an all-round Buddhist, devoted as much to the Nara Kegon and the Heian Shingon doctrines as to Kamakura Zen beliefs. He served as Abbot at Kôzanji Temple of the Kegon sect which is located to the north-west of Kyoto. Because of this poem he has been popularly called the "moon poet". In this tradition, he is also known for sitting high up in a tree viewing the moon. Now, a moon is not seen in the picture of Myôe in the tree, but it is easy to imagine a full moon beyond where he sits. What else can it be? The picture is dated to the thirteenth century and seen at the Kôzanji temple.
Central part of the picture below.
For this reason he was also named Chôka, "bird’s nest", in the Zen tradition. There are a number of pictures of Myôe sitting in a tree in the Kôzanji Temple. They are different in detail but in all of them he sits as in a "bird’s nest" and looks in the same direction, and the tree looks the same in foliage and colour. They can be oblong and they can be square. It can be imagined that the same painter made them and at about the same time in the thirteenth century. He is mentioned as Jônin.

Myôe is not only renowned and because of a bright full moon seen from the tree. He is also as known for his dreams diary that he kept from his 19th until his 58th year, the year before his death. Half of the diary is still extant and therefore we can actually “read” his dreams. Sometimes he writes down interpretations as well. As far as we know, he may the one of the first in the world literature to keep a dream diary.

At 19, thus, Myôe began a dream diary, that is, before he became the abbot at Kôzanji Temple in 1208 at the age of 34. The Kôben yume no ki, The "Record of Kôben’s (Myôe’s) dreams", is often quoted among dream collections and Frédéric Girard has written about it with the title Myôe et le Journal de ces rêves, which can be found in Journal Asiatique, tome CCLXXXVIII, no 1-2, 1990, pp. 167-193.
Myôe is also known for his Chinese poetry, 155 of which is a National Treasure at the Kyoto National Museum. It is dated 1248, but not as known as his dream record, the Kôben yume no ki.

Myôe belonged to both the Kegon sect, one of the six Nara sects, and the Shingon Heian sect but was also in touch with the Zen beliefs of the Kamakura times. He originated from Kii province but came to live on Mount Takao, northwest of Kyoto from 1181 at Jingôji temple, a Shingon temple, where he became a priest at 16 and took the tonsure (1188). He retired to a mountain to live alone and avoid secularized Buddhism.

Myôe belonged to the old Buddhism where women were not counted. He certainly subscribed to this belief in young days but with time he began to accept the anima as part of the human psyche. This is known by interpretations of his many dreams where women play a prominent and positive part. He was close to Yung in modern European psychology where the feminine anima joins the masculine animus for a full personality.

He was appointed abbot at Kôzanji Temple, northwest of Kyoto, in 1206, by the emperor Go-Toba and adopted the religious name Kôben around 1210. He died at 60 (1232) surrounded by his disciples and his last words were, "I come from where the precepts (arubeki yô wa) are fulfilled."

His aim was to rejuvenate the Kegon (Hua-yen) doctrine that had lost its appeal by the time of Kamakura. He was devoted to the study of Kegon theories and esoteric Buddhism (mikkyô) and is known for his own synthesis of the universal Kegon thought. Being an eminent scholar and personality he influenced the Kamakura Buddhism dominated by Amida and Zen. He was opposed to the growing emphasis on the Nembutsu prayer and on the reliance on Amida as the only means of salvation. Tradition has it that he was in close touch with his contemporary, Eisai (1141-1215), the founder of Rinzai Zen, in the early twelfth century, who introduced him to both the cultivation and usage of tea.
Vägen up to Kôzanji Temple.

A wooden tablet in the Kôzanji Temple Myôe lists regulations for monks to follow, named Arubekiyôwa, “Precepts to be followed!” These concerned a monk’s life from 6 o’clock in the morning and well into the night. Besides time they concerned etiquette in both the Temple Study Hall and the Buddha Altar Hall, both dress and behaviour. Among them one finds “Do not lie down, “Place a straw mat at your usual seat” and other rules that make little sense today but were perhaps important for order in his day. The regimen of monkly practices included zazen meditation and recitation of the sutras and the Mantra of Light under Myôe’s abbotship. Moreover, he set up strict rules of etiquette for both the Temple Study Hall and the Buddha Hall which were written down and posted as the temple regulations for behaviour at Kôzanji. He was thus first a scholar and a strict abbot and only later the popular moon poet that we know of. They were the two sides of a rich personality, more known in the after-world for his moon infatuation than the Buddhist order that he imposed.

The Kôben_yume no ki, “Record of Kôben’s (Myôe’s) dreams” is mentioned among dream collections. Because of his interest in his own dreams, he is named Myôe the Dreamkeeper by Professor George J. Tanabe and compared with Karl Gustaf Yung by Professor Hayao Kawai.
The Golden Hall at Kôzanji.

Arubeki yô wa became a motto of his own life. The important thing is just to be as one should be in this life. He does not care about salvation in the next life. The balance between matter and psyche here and now comes first.

Being a devout Nara and Heian Buddhist it is understandable that he was a critic of the senju nenbutsu and Pure Land thinking and practices of his age. He wrote two works in which he refuted Hônen’s teachings. First, he wrote Zaijarin, “Treatise to destroy heretical Views” and then a continuation in Zaijarin shogonki, “Elaboration of the Zaijarin.” He sought to refute Hônen’s teachings in the Sentakushu. Simple Amida beliefs were not for him.
An autumnal view by the Kôzanji Temple.
In Kawabata Yasunari’s Nobel speech we are told of his being a ‘moon poet’ by his reciting the *Akaaka ya* “waka” poem, the poem that Kawabata so lovingly reproduced calligraphically and here is copied above. He says that it is one among Myôe’s poems, copies of which he loved to give his friends and acquaintances. The poem has also the simplicity that makes it easy to memorize and be rendered on a single sheet of paper. Its 31 syllables is indeed the epitome of moon worship. The writer of this paper is the happy recipient of a copy.

All his various activities witness about his rich personality. His Buddhism which comprises both the “old” Buddhism of both Nara and Heian and “new” Buddhism of Kamakura shows that he was not satisfied with a one-way approach to the truth but wished a comprehensive view of all aspects of a deep religious life. Recitation of holy mantra was not enough, neither was zazen meditation. His moon admiration on the one hand and his dream infatuation can be added. In his search for a complete and all-comprehensive view, he also planned twice to go to India in 1203 and 1205 but both times an augur from the kami of the Kasuga shrine stopped him from going.

In the end, we have two Myôe. On the one hand, we have the priest and scholar who knew his Chinese och was responsible for learned treatises and is remembered as the abbot of Kôzanji Temple, and, on the other hand, we have the legendary Myôe who is remembered as the “moon” poet nestled high up in a tree. It is as the legend that we meet him in the tree and in Kawabata Yasunari’s Nobel speech; as a medieval priest and scholar he is dead. It is the legendary Myôe whom we meet in Kawabata Yasunari’s moon poem and is recited at the Nobel festivities in Stockholm in 1968 who is today’s winner.

But is the legend so improbable in all its details? Is it so improbable that Myôe climbed a high cliff to reach the large boulder which he found to be the right place for meditation? And was it so improbable that his student and acolyte hurriedly spread a straw mat over the rock for his master and teacher? A zen believer also otherwise is seated on a straw mat when in meditation. That there was an impressive tree nearby is not at all mysterious and that one can climb it, is more than natural; that happens on any mountain. Not only in Japan.

And that he took refuge there in certain instances, for example, when the moon was hidden by the same tree, is just what an eccentric Zen-ist would do. Soon both the boulder and the tree were named as the Meditation Rock (jôshinseki) and the Rope-Seat Tree (jôshujuju). It is nothing unnatural that devoted followers name places and objects that are connected with their masters. Jônin’s pictures were probably made soon after Myôe’s Death and probably depict things rather truthfully!

Actually, Myôe was well-known, perhaps already in his life-time, a legend. He did not move in the fashionable poetic circles of his day but he came to the attention of Fujiwara Teika (1162-1241) late in life. He notes in his diary, Meigetsuki (“The Journal of the Full Moon”) that in 1229 he visited Kôzanji together with his wife and children to hear Myôji lecture on the Buddhist precepts. He would not have come if Myôe by that
time had not a certain reputation. This was six years before his death. Note that the “full moon” is mentioned in Teika’s title. Could it have been Myôe’s infatuation with the moon that brought him to Kôzanji? That he had heard of it and that they were soul mates and both afficionados?

Now, Myôe’s relationship with the moon was special. The moon seems to have been his close companion with whom he talks and associates during his zazen sessions. But as Kawabata says Myôe is not just addressing the moon as his companion. “Seeing the moon, he becomes the moon, the moon seen by him becomes him. He sinks into nature and becomes one with nature.” Myôe and the moon are a whole, parts of the same nature, no line drawn between them and nature. For Myôe it becomes the clear heart of the monk in the zazen rapture which mixes with the light of the dawn Moon. All becomes an entity, all shined by the same light. This shine of nature comes through whether in a tree’s bird’s nest, a crag hill or in the zazen hall. Perhaps best on a cliff or in a tree in the midst of nature.

It is not an object out in space circulating, coming and going. It is a close friend and companion who escorts him. How he must have hated the cloudy days when the moon did not come forth! Listen to another of Myôe’s waka with the moon in forefront:

“The winter moon comes from the clouds to keep me company. The wind is piercing, the snow is cold.”

This poem is commented by Myôe himself and we get the heart of its meaning. He says (Seidensticker’s translation): “On the night of the twelfth day of the twelfth month of the year 1224, the moon was behind clouds, as I sat in meditation in the Kakyû Hall. When the hour of the midnight vigil came, I ceased meditation and descended from the hall on the peak to the lower quarters, and as I did so the moon came from the clouds and set the snow to glowing. The moon was my companion, and not even the wolf howling in the valley brought fear. When, presently, I came out of the lower again, the moon was again behind clouds. As the bell was signalling the late-night vigil, I made my way once more to the peak, and the moon saw me on the way. I entered the meditation hall, and the moon, chasing the clouds, was about to sinking behind the peak beyond. And it seemed to me that it was keeping me secret company.”

In yet another waka the companionship between Myôe and the moon is even more clearly expressed:

“I shall go behind the mountain. Go there too, O moon! Night after night we shall keep each other company!”

Kawabata comments, “Seeing the moon, he becomes the moon, the moon seen by him becomes him. He sinks into nature, becomes one with nature.”

Myôe sees psyche in all matter. Matter is alive, with mind and soul in all its constituents. Body and mind coagulates. He wants to write a letter to a cherry tree he loves, but he does not dare to do so because he is afraid that people would think that he has gone
mad. He thinks seriously to send a letter to an island, Karuma, that he loves, and a disciple wonders where to deliver it. Myôe tells him that he could just leave it anywhere on the island, shouting, “This is a letter from Myôe!”

Now, the moon has never been for just the eccentrics in Japan. It was a reality as much for the general person as for the eccentric poet and philosopher. And one dares say, as much in the West as in the East. In poetry the moon says more than the sun. Cole Porter sings about “the still in the night” with “the moon in its flight.” Myôe yells, “Come and see the moon!” from the cliff where he practices zazen and meditates. In both cases it is the bright moon that arouses emotions that is conveyed to an audience or a bystander. The bright full moon is combined with an emotional state that, for example, the sun or a star could not bring forth. There are stories from the Second World War about how Japanese officers acted violently together with the shining moon, and this writer experienced how a Japanese friend combined hot baths with a full moon through the window: first hot in the bath tub and then cooled in the shine on the sofa beside the tub.

In the end, the moon has played a role in people’s lives whether East or West. It has been an emotional backdrop in films and songs in the West; in the East, under the influence of Buddhism, an outcome of the thinking that all things are one.
PS

In the glamour and festivitas of the Nobel dinner it was probably only the Swedish king, Gustaf VI Adolf who took an interest in Zen and Buddhist philosophy. A lively conversation took place between the king and Mrs Kawabata whose gist was Zen-ist thought in Japan.

Mrs Kawabata to the left, the king in the middle and the interpreter, Olof G. Lidin, to the right.

Olof G. Lidin