

HERMITISM AND IMPERMANENCE: A RESPONSE TO NAGASAWA'S ARGUMENT ON TRANSCENDENTALISM IN MEDIEVAL JAPAN

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Abstract. Nagasawa argues that only transcendentalism can constitute a potentially successful response to the problem of impermanence. In this review, I argue that Chōmei's hermitism can be another realistic strategy to respond to it. Chōmei lived in a small house in the remote mountains and interacted with the surrounding nature. His lifestyle is considered a good example of reconciling one's finite life with the impermanence of the world and human sufferings. I conclude that Nagasawa's interpretation of hermitism might be one-sided.

I.

Yujin Nagasawa's paper "Evil and the Problem of Impermanence in Medieval Japanese Philosophy" gives us a beautifully constructed argument on Medieval Japanese views on impermanence, which was one of the key concepts in Japanese Buddhism at that time. He classifies the views of impermanence held by intellectuals into four categories — hermitism, hedonism, indifferentism, and transcendentalism — and assesses the positive and negative sides of their ways of thinking. He concludes that "only transcendentalism ... can constitute a potentially successful response to the problem of impermanence," and the other three positions have yet to tackle difficult philosophical problems arising from the lack of involvement in supernaturalist ontology.

I deeply appreciate his analytical discussion of Medieval Japanese religious worldviews and his stimulating argument on transcendentalism in Japanese Buddhism. However, contrary to Nagasawa's argument, I believe that

hermitism must have more positive possibilities in search of a solution to the problem of impermanence than he estimates in his paper. This point also has a close relation to how hermits interpreted transitions of nature surrounding them.

Let us see Nagasawa's argument on Chōmei's hermitism. Chōmei's lifestyle was to "live a simple life as a hermit and stay away from any potential disasters and catastrophes that we may encounter in civilization." After experiencing natural disasters in Kyoto, Chōmei moved to a small house and became a lay monk. He tried to "relinquish all worldly attachments and pursue equanimity." Of course, it is almost impossible for hermits to acquire enlightenment in this world, but hermitism can offer them "practical advice" to achieve "temporary happiness" on earth.

Although Nagasawa admits that "we can still be content with life if we avoid the negative consequences of human wrongdoings and natural disasters by living in isolation," he strongly claims that hermitism cannot give us an "ultimate solution to the problem of impermanence." The reason is that "hermitism is at best a response to the problem of pain and suffering, not the problem of impermanence." Hermits can solve pain and suffering, but they cannot "overcome impermanence itself." No matter how thoroughly they renounce the world, hermits are still under the influence of constant temporal changes of the world, so they cannot escape the "suffering of change" and the "suffering of existence." Hence, Chōmei's hermitism cannot be an ultimate solution to them. This is an outline of Nagasawa's argument on Chōmei's hermitism, but I could not clearly understand what Nagasawa meant by "ultimate solution." Before thinking about it, I want to see the original Japanese text of Chōmei's *Hōjōki* and examine what he actually writes in the second half of his book.

After describing the natural disasters in detail, Chōmei begins talking about his reclusive life in a tiny house in the mountains. He was 60 years old at that time. How did Chōmei lead his hermit life there?¹ His small house was equipped with pictures of Buddha, Buddhist sutras, books of poetry, classical literature, and various musical instruments. There were trees and water

1 The following summary was made by me from the original Japanese text of *Hōjōki*. The book I used was the one edited by Kazuhiko Asami (鴨長明『方丈記』浅見和彦校訂・訳, ちくま学芸文庫, 2011).

bottles in the garden, which was surrounded by mountains and valleys. He enjoyed the beauty of seasonal flowers and the chirp of birds visiting his garden. In spring, he saw a cluster of wisteria, which were like purple clouds. In summer, he enjoyed the twitter of lesser cuckoos. Hearing the birds singing, he imagined his final journey toward death. In autumn, his ears were filled with the sound of evening cicadas. It sounded as if cicadas had been crying over this world's impermanence. In winter, he enjoyed viewing snow. The piling and melting snow looked as if it had been human sins. Chōmei lived a reclusive life surrounded by beautiful flowers, trees, and birds, sensing the transitions of the four seasons. What came and went through his mind was the beauty of nature and the impermanence of the world he lived in.

Sometimes he went down to a nearby port and observed the coming and going of ships. In the evening, he heard the sound of wind rustling through the leaves and the sound of running water in the garden, and he played lute instruments. Playing music was not for someone else, but for his own solace. During the music, Chōmei recalled a lingering fragrance of outside society and human culture in the backdrop of seasonal transitions of nature surrounding him.

Sometimes, a boy living in a house in the outskirts of the mountain visited him. The boy was 10 years old and Chōmei was 60. They walked around the mountains together and picked various small, cute flowers and seeds, or sometimes they went to paddy fields, picked up fallen straws, and made ornaments. Chōmei writes that the time spent with the boy was a great comfort for him, as he was living alone in a small house in the remote mountains. Chōmei's descriptions of this part really touch my heart.

When the weather was good, Chōmei would climb up the mountain and look down on villages, and sometimes he went further to another mountain and then came back home. On a silent night, he looked at the moon through the window, remembered his deceased friends and parents, and wept hearing the cries of monkeys outside. Lightening bugs in the garden recalled him of a house's bonfire in the distance, and morning rain recalled him of a storm blowing leaves. Hearing birds singing, he remembered the voices of his father and mother. Five years passed, and he heard the rumor of his acquaintances' deaths. And just after this part, the impressive sentences Nagasawa quotes from Chōmei appear: "Knowing what the world holds and its ways, I desire

nothing from it, nor chase after its prizes. My one craving is to be at peace, my one pleasure to live free of troubles....”

This is the context in which Chōmei expresses his craving for living at peace and his pleasure of living free of troubles. Considering all the above descriptions about his relationships with nature and memories, we can, for the first time, fully understand the true reality of Chōmei’s hermitism.

Chōmei writes that everyone makes their house for their family members or friends, but he has made his house solely for the sake of himself. There was no one who would live with him. Chōmei stares at the fate of his life in the last few paragraphs of *Hōjōki*. He writes that his life is approaching a final stage and the remaining time is becoming short. Buddha preached that we should never have attachments to anything. Love for the tiny house and silent life there was a clear example of such attachment. Chōmei thought that describing detailed enjoyments of a hermit life in *Hōjōki* should therefore be finished.

On a silent morning, he continued thinking deeply about the above truth and asked himself: “I have renounced the world and hid in the mountains in order to control my mind and practice Buddhism. However, although my figure is that of a practitioner, my heart is still deeply tainted. Although my house looks that of a distinguished monk, my practice has never reached even an initial stage of Buddhist enlightenment. Is this a result of *karma* caused by poverty in my former life before having been born to this world, or a madness induced by my worldly desires?” He did not have any answer. All he did then was just to chant a few holy words in a sutra.²

We can summarize some important characteristics of Chōmei’s reclusive life as follows. Firstly, he was living his life vividly sensing the seasonal transitions of the surrounding nature. He was hearing the sound of winds, tweets of birds, and cries of wild animals. An encounter with small seasonal flowers was a great joy for him. His interactions with transitional nature gave him tiny happiness, solace, and a sense of unavoidable impermanence. Secondly, from time to time he remembered his life in the city, his friends there, and his deceased parents. Since he was leading a reclusive life in the remote mountains, he was not able to visit the city center. What he could do was just overlook the view of villages from a distance, play musical instruments, and remember

2 “不請阿弥陀仏、両三遍申してやみぬ。”

people he missed from inside his house. Sometimes he cried remembering them. Thirdly, he himself did not think that he was an authentic Buddhist practitioner, although other people thought that he was. He understood that he was full of worldly desires and was not able to escape from attachments to his hermit lifestyle, especially enjoyment arising from interactions with transitional nature and by memories of the beautiful times he had spent with his beloved ones.

Nevertheless, I do not think that he regretted choosing a hermit lifestyle. Of course, he was not able to transcend the “suffering of change” or the “suffering of existence” caused by the impermanence of the world. Hence, if Nagasawa’s “solution” means overcoming impermanence itself, it is crystal clear that Chōmei’s hermit lifestyle could not provide any solutions to it. However, I believe that Chōmei was successful in presenting another type of solution to the problem of impermanence, that is, a lifestyle of affirming impermanence and living with it through the rest of his life. Then, what does it mean to affirm impermanence and live with it? It does not mean to overcome impermanence and acquire a state of permanence somewhere in the universes. It means, on the contrary, to live out this impermanent world, continuously sensing the impermanence of everything through one’s whole body and mind. On the one hand, it is very sad that our relationships with loved ones and our properties we have gained do not last long and disappear in the end. In this sense, living in an impermanent world is futile and empty. On the other hand, however, living finite life surrounded by the beauty of ephemeral and impermanent nature such as seasonal flowers, the singing of birds in the forest, and summer winds and winter snow, which are also finite, is a small but precious happiness for a hermit who has escaped from complicated human relationships that would necessarily occur in our daily lives in a town or village. In addition, in the case of Chōmei, interacting with a 10-year-old boy or remembering good memories of the past must have been a sweet solace for him. It is true that impermanence provides us with unsolvable suffering, but if we can affirm and embrace the existence of such suffering through a hermit lifestyle and live our life without being heavily upset by the impermanence of the world, this should be considered another type of solution to the problem of impermanence. My conclusion is that Chōmei’s hermitism can be interpreted as such.

Seiichi Takeuchi argues that there were at least two types of solutions to the problem of impermanence in traditional Japanese literature. The one is transcendence and the other is immanence. He refers to poet and novelist Izumi Shikibu as a typical example of those who chose the latter solution. She had a strong determination to remain within this world and lived out her life fully with worldly impermanence.³ Takeuchi then argues that Chōmei might have been a person who sits on the fence between the world of transcendence and the world of immanence, quoting the same paragraph I quoted above.⁴ Takeuchi calls this type of positioning “the inbetween of transcendence and immanence.”⁵ This term might precisely illustrate Chōmei’s final state of mind.

Let us go back again to Nagasawa’s paper. He concludes that “only transcendentalism, which requires supernaturalism, can constitute a potentially successful response to the problem of impermanence,” but I think that this conclusion may overevaluate the power of transcendentalism. According to Nagasawa, hermitism is “a ‘defensive’ response to the problem of impermanence, a response that is designed to reduce the amount of pain and suffering in reality.” I think that this is a one-sided view of Chōmei’s hermitism. Chōmei’s worldview has another aspect, that is, the worldview that we can reach a reconciliation with impermanence and live with it, not by turning our eyes from impermanence, but by continuously sensing impermanence in the seasonal transitions of nature and remembering our memories of beloved ones in a hermit lifestyle. For Chōmei, hermitism was a lifestyle that enabled him to be reconciled with the impermanence of the world. For him, transcending or overcoming impermanence was not an ultimate solution. The solution he reached was a lifestyle of affirming, embracing, and being reconciled with impermanence. Nagasawa argues that “[t]here is no hope of solving the problem of impermanence without a supernaturalist ontology because our current existence in the material universe is spatiotemporally finite.” This is a very strong statement. Nagasawa might reply to me that Chōmei’s reconciliation strategy is no more than defeatism or just compromise. However, I do not necessarily think so. While transcending or overcoming impermanence

3 Seiichi Takeuchi (2007). *‘Impermanence’ and the Japanese*. 「はかなさ」と日本人, 平凡社新書, pp. 72–75.

4 Ibid., pp. 82–83.

5 Ibid., p. 162.

is a straightforward, logical solution to the problem of impermanence, reconciling with impermanence can also be considered another logical solution, because it is reasonable to think that if transcending or overcoming is considered almost impossible for many people, the next best strategy is to affirm, embrace, and reach a reconciliation with impermanence. A positive side of this strategy is that it can be practiced not only by Buddhist monks but by other people who cannot fully escape from their attachments to worldly affairs and beautiful memories. Hermitism is considered a realistic way of reconciling our worldly lives with impermanence that is accessible by ordinary people like you and me.