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Spiritual Quest in Hojoki and Hosshinshu and the Duality of Art and Religion

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Spiritual Quest in *Hojoki* and *Hosshinshu* and the Duality of Art and Religion

The individual’s quest for enlightenment in Japan is a serious one. One such individual from the medieval Japanese period will be the subject of this paper. Kamo no Chomei, a recluse, poet, and priest who lived from 1155-1216 strove to attain a religious awakening of the mind during the latter half of his life. The question of whether he succeeded or not is a difficult one to answer, however, by examining two of his major works—*Hojoki* and *Hosshinshu*—the nature of Chomei’s quest should become clearer. Although I do not believe Chomei found the enlightenment he sought; the quest itself and his expression of it through writing is wholly engrossing. Through my examination of Kamo no Chomei’s writings, the very nature of religious writing will be called into question in conjunction with the role of nonduality. By his inability to separate himself from his hut and artistic expression, Chomei was trapped in dual states and could not achieve the enlightenment of nonduality no matter how hard he tried.

Before delving into the main section of this paper, I would like to preface it with background information on Chomei’s life, work, and the period in which he was writing. Chomei was a member of the court but around the age of twenty-one he gave up a court career and devoted himself to the arts. It was at this same time that both his father and his main benefactor at court passed away. This could be read in two ways: either Chomei gave up court life because his main supports for advancement had died or because all along he really only wanted to pursue artistic endeavors and with the deaths of those interested in his courtly advancement he felt free to indulge his own desires. The latter seems slightly more probable as Chomei did not totally abandon his acquaintances at court and did remain in favor with the ruling
parties for some years afterwards. It was only after the Kamo Shrine incident that he totally
distanced himself from court. Chomei suffered occasionally from lack of money and when the
straits got dire he would perform some functions at the Kamo Shrine where his family held
hereditary office. Then around 1204, Chomei was passed over for the appointment as the head
of the shrine even though he was sure he would get it. It was because of this disgrace that
Chomei first exiled himself north of the capital. He then proceeded to take Buddhist holy orders,
perhaps in personal retaliation against Shinto for the shrine that he lost he turned to the Buddhist
religion for solace, (III, 177).

It was after having become a Buddhist priest that Chomei wrote all three of his main
works: Mumyosho; a treatise on poetry (1209-1210), Hojoki; an account of his life (1212), and
Hosshinshu; a collection of religious awakenings (1214-1215), (III, 177). All three were written
in states of relative isolation, in particular the latter two can be seen as Chomei’s attempts to cut
all ties to the secular world and awaken himself spiritually. However the means by which
Chomei prepares himself for enlightenment is through the medium of art, which in itself is
predominantly a secular phenomenon. In Hosshinshu, he writes:

Aestheticism [suki] means taking no pleasure in social intercourse, refusing to grieve
over misfortune, feeling touched by the bloom and fall of flowers, and longing for the
rise and set of the moon. In this way we constantly keep our hearts clear of blemish and,
before we realize it, we come to understand how it is that things appear and vanish, and
we cease to have attachment to fame and profit. This is to enter the path of deliverance,
of freedom from illusion, (II, 154).

In this quote, Chomei outlines the means to enlightenment through aestheticism. Aesthetic
practice is not equal to religious practice. It’s similar but it is more artistic in nature, and so
Chomei’s path to deliverance/enlightenment comes through the aesthetic appreciation of flowers,
the moon—nature. The claim here is that through art, through the representational discourse of
nature in language, the individual can achieve a religious path of deliverance. In itself this idea is contradictory since, after all, Buddhism should be the casting off of all material and secular ties to the actual world in order to transfigure oneself into a spiritual being. The crux, as I see it, of Chomei’s inability to attain full enlightenment is either because of his failure to wholly integrate the two separate ideas of religion and art, or his failure to discard art in favor of a single-minded pursuit of religion. What Chomei tries to do is justify the practice of using language and art as a vehicle to enlightenment, but in the end these dualistic states only serve to hold him back from the realization of the nonduality of the world.

To look at the *Hojoki* first, one becomes aware of Chomei’s practice of spatially separating the two things that he is trying to integrate.

On the north side
behind a screen
an image of Amida
and next to it, Fugen.
In front of them
the Lotus Sutra

In the southwest
a bamboo ledge
with three black leather lined baskets
for poetry and music, (I, 62-63).

Chomei moves between one medium of expression and another effortlessly, but they are separated in literal space and thus, it becomes all the more difficult for him to unite them in the metaphorical abstract.

In his efforts to explicate why artistic expression deserved a special place as a religious practice, Chomei wrote: “How much more so then, because the way of poetry is one that can penetrate to the essence of things, can we depend on it and, through this medium, calm the mind and meditate on the transience of all worldly things,” (IV, 157). The difficulty with his claim is
that it only applies as long as the poetry is in praise of the Buddha. If the subject matter is anything worldly or material then it will not help one to find the proper path. Besides this reason, the writing is in itself a material expression of pen and paper. Rajyashree Pandey wrote of the paradox between Buddhism and language, “words were seen as essentially inadequate to the task of capturing the absolute, which was beyond all language and all thought,” (IV, 10). This quote brings across the ideology that the experience of the absolute is the aim, not the translation of the experience into words which merely serves to debase the initial integrity of the absolute.

J. Thomas Rimer in writing about Chomei’s *Mumyoshu*, wrote that Chomei’s intention was to promote the idea that “it is the actual experience, on whatever level, that provides the ultimate authenticity of any work of art,” (V, 120). Chomei is thus attempting to justify the use of poetry in capturing the experience: as long as you write about the actual experience than your work is true and authentic in capturing the absolute. But really, what Chomei should have realized is that it is the actual experience that provides the authenticity not the work of art that can come out of it. In needing to share the experience with others by writing it down Chomei is merely strengthening the ties that bind him to this world.

*Hojoki* itself is a record of Chomei’s experiences both before he becomes a priest-recluse and during the time he lived in his hut. The main point of the work seems to be to document the transient nature of all human beings and their products. Thus it begins:

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The flowing river
never stops
and yet the water
never stays
the same.

Foam floats
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upon the pools,
scattering, reforming,
ever lingering long.

So it is with man
and all his dwelling places
here on earth. (I, 31)

This is an interesting way to start a piece of writing, especially when consideration is taken of the proof that the work has survived in a permanent manner to the year 2000. By writing on the nature of impermanence Chomei was putting down thoughts of a permanent constitution. His work survives and his memory lingers on through his writing. The fact that he wrote at all is what bothers me the most because in writing Chomei was commending himself to posterity and future generations. The impossibility of his being able to escape the dualistic nature of expression through language and absolute experience is immediately apparent. Through the writing of Hojoki, Chomei could not escape dualism and attain enlightenment and now let me show you how and why.

In the final section of Hojoki, Chomei devotes the space to an account of life in his hut. In writing about his hut though he comes to realize how attached to it he really is. The hut becomes a symbol for the tie that is holding him to this world. The body is the house of the soul and it goes to show that Chomei never really escaped the dualistic conjunction of mind and body. The mind is the vehicle through which one attains enlightenment and the body stands for the seat of the physical desires which anchor one to the real world. In his realization of his attachment to the hut, Chomei is experiencing attachment to physicality, proving that he has not transcended his bodily desires. He wrote:

Buddha taught
we must not be attached.
Yet the way I love this hut is itself attachment. (I, 76)

In his epiphany that he is still attached to the body, Chomei realizes something even more pressing: “To what end/ do I pour this out?” (I, 76). He questions his very mode of existence here. What he has done all along is write, poured out his feelings and observations, and all of it has only served to attach him to the present moment, which by becoming a recluse he had been seeking to transcend. In writing he has displayed an attachment to his family, his age, his home, and the act of writing itself. And while he was doing all this writing he was neglecting his true purpose as a priest searching for enlightenment, for which he berates himself in the following lines:

Your house is modeled on that of Vimalakirti. Your practices are not as mindful as those of Suddhipathaka. (I, 77).

Focusing first on Chomei’s reference to Suddhipathaka, one must look back at exactly how Chomei practiced his religious observances to understand how he was less mindful. Also, the character of Suddhipathaka himself must be explained. The textual notes state that Suddhipathaka was a disciple of Buddha who “famously took four months to remember one short prayer,” (I, 91). In saying that he was even more lax in his religious observations than this Chomei is speaking truly as can be evidenced by the text itself. Earlier in Hojoki Chomei wrote:

When in no mood for chanting nor caring to read sutras I can choose to rest.

I need not try so hard to obey commandments. Little chance to break them here! (I, 64-65)
In his laziness at not even bothering to hold to a schedule of religious duties Chomei is even worse than Suddhipathaka who at least learned the prayer even if it did take him four months. Chomei even tries to justify his lax attitude by saying that since he is living as a recluse immersed in nature he is naturally in harmony with the Buddhist dharma. Simply because there are no obvious temptations to cause him to break commandments does not mean there are none at all. By forgoing the reading of sutras and chanting, Chomei was giving into a temptation of irreligious laziness. This attitude of his was neither devout nor pious and it only led to his own failure in the end. Chomei’s fall from principles begun in earnest to a state where he begun to doubt his own path is the meaning of the reference to Suddhipathaka.

As to the allusion to Vimalakirti, well this one is far more interesting in literary and theological terms. Vimalakirti was an enlightened disciple of Buddha who had a sutra named after him. Hojoki is in some ways modeled directly after the Vimalakirti Sutra: the opening phrases, the structure, meaning, and most of all, the very end. In the Sutra of Vimalakirti, there is a section on nonduality wherein a disciple named Manjusri goes to visit Vimalakirti and a dialogue between the two is recorded. Finally they come to an offering of opinions on the definition of nonduality and Manjusri says, “‘When all things are no longer within the province of either word or speech, and of either indication or knowledge, and are beyond questions and answers, this is initiation into the nondual dharma.’” When Vimalakirti is asked for his definition he remains completely silent and Manjusri exclaims, “‘Excellent, excellent, can there be true initiation into the nondual dharma until the words and speech are no longer written or spoken?’” (IV, 142). This whole passage is brilliant because it displays the ability of one man to attain enlightenment through understanding of nonduality and silence—but it is still expressed in
words. Only through language is this story, this guiding example, available to the society en masse. The paradox is astounding as it calls into question the very nature of religious writing once again. For Chomei though, the story brings him to the conclusion that in trying to copy Vimalakirti’s way of life he succeeded only in the external habitation and not the essential teaching of silence. And so at the end of Hojoki, Kamo no Chomei concludes with the following words:

To these questions of mind,  
there is no answer.  
So now  
I use my impure tongue  
to offer a few prayers  
to Amida and then  
silence. (I, 78)

In the final words of Hojoki, Chomei sinks into silence, perhaps he does this in simple imitation without understanding of Vimalakirti’s silence, or maybe he has truly come to comprehend the meaning of nonduality. However, with his inability to complete the full recitation of the nenbutsu ten times, (IV, 167), and his statement that he is “impure” gives the silence more a feeling of anguish than enlightenment. It seems as if he found it impossible to answer the “questions of mind” that his own mind was posing and in this state of crisis of belief, Chomei’s defenses fell. He could no longer answer the question of what the “end,” (I, 76), in pouring out all these words was for. Thus, he could no longer dupe himself into believing that he had reconciled the nature of his art and of his religion. In this terrible recognition of himself by himself he most likely fell into the silence out of despair.

Further evidence for the theory that he did not gain understanding of the silence of nonduality comes out of the fact that Chomei wrote another text after Hojoki entitled Hosshinshu which was begun in the year 1214, two years after the completion of Hojoki. If Chomei had
come to realize the nature of nonduality in the use of art/language and the pursuit of enlightenment he would not have written another book. As he did write it, the very thought that he may have attained enlightenment must be discarded. Also, in *Hosshinshu*, Chomei continues his attempts to reconcile in writing the ways in which deep attachment to artistic pursuits can be integrated with a commitment to the way of the Buddha. In *Hosshinshu*, Chomei relates various stories of ordinary people who have achieved varying states of enlightenment primarily through the aid of art. “In some stories the text presumes a natural affinity between religious awakening and the pursuit of music and poetry. At other times, these artistic practices are viewed as an expedient means that leads to religious awakening,” (IV, 138). The fact that he is continuing in his efforts to unite the two opposites stands for itself in making the claim that he has not yet come to a definitive conclusion. Thus it is that although Chomei has with this work of literature ironed out some of the difficulties he faced in *Hojoki*, the piece itself is more in the line of a continuing dialogue with himself than as proof of his attainment of enlightenment. At the end of *Hojoki*, Chomei experienced a crisis in the way his mind conceived of his own dual nature. In *Hosshinshu*, Chomei is writing for himself and only himself. He says in the preface, “‘Through these trivial tales that I have picked up by the wayside, I wish merely to experience, at least a little, the religious awakening of my mind,’” (IV, 112). It is his own mind that he is concerned with now and in this twist to introspective contemplation/self-dialogue Chomei can record and read the collected stories of *Hosshinshu* as attempts at enlightenment similar to his own. He is still trying to justify his own use of art to achieve enlightenment and in the stories he has examples of people who have done so. However, one gets the sense that even with all these examples Chomei simply continues in his efforts to form a correlation between art and Buddhism without actually achieving a conclusion satisfactory to himself and his dual mind.
In moving from discussion of Hojoki to Hosshinshu, I have attempted to show Chomei’s own attempts to move from one plane of existence to another. In taking orders and becoming a recluse Chomei set himself up with certain expectations and even after his failure to achieve his ends during the writing of Hojoki he rallied his efforts and wrote Hosshinshu. In Hosshinshu, he attempted to prove, at least to himself if no one else, that art is integrally linked to religion. My claim that Chomei was living in a state of self-delusion is controversial and perhaps could be vehemently attacked. However, through my own understanding of the nature of duality in the opposing forces of art and religion Chomei’s efforts at enlightenment were all futile as I have attempted to prove.
List of Works Cited


