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The Logic of Absolutely Contradictory Self-identity and Aesthetic Values in Zen Art

Abstract

This article aims to show that *yūgen*, *wabi* and *sabi* deserve to be called aesthetic values of Zen art only when their definition complies with the logic of absolute contradictory self-identity (the logic of paradox). Some definitions of *yūgen*, *wabi* and *sabi* are not paradoxical and therefore they cannot be linked to Zen. I will try to prove that one must be aware of the ambiguity of the aforementioned types of beauty – their meanings cannot be narrowed to fit only within the realm of Zen tradition. The different types of beauty that Japanese artists strove to express in their works have specific names. It's impossible to find equivalents for many of them in Western aesthetic categories. The starting point of our inquiry will be aesthetic categories in Japanese poetry, because they have always exerted great influence on art in Japan. Aesthetic values in Zen art are also connected with reflection on the structure of reality – specifically, reality as experienced in the act of Enlightenment (*satori*).

Keywords: Japanese aesthetics, aesthetic categories, *yūgen*, *wabi*, *sabi*, Zen philosophy, Zen art

In Japanese tradition the concept of beauty was not analyzed abstractly in isolation from its concrete manifestations – specific aesthetic categories considered to be types of beauty were analyzed. Accordingly, for the needs of our inquiry, we will treat beauty in a general sense as an aesthetic ideal that man renders concrete, defining various types of beauty.¹

¹ In Western aesthetics, beauty is treated as a supreme aesthetic value or as one of the particular aesthetic categories – this understanding of beauty, however, has no equivalent in the aesthetic tradition of Japan.

In my opinion, beauty in a general sense does not have any attributes, because it means that which is positively evaluated aesthetically, inspires and is expressed in works of art. How are the different types of beauty established? Man, when in contact with reality (including nature), abstracts concepts and creates concrete aesthetic ideals, which are directly or indirectly related to his philosophical and religious reflection on the world. This reflection of course is shaped by historical and cultural circumstances. This is borne out by the fact, for instance, that beauty was not viewed in Japan in terms of appropriate proportions or symmetry, because there was no philosophical reflection there characteristic of classical Greek philosophy (especially the Pythagorean school). The same aesthetic ideals may arise in different cultures only as the result of the same reflection on the world. In this sense there is no universal beauty – beauty as harmony is only one type of beauty, which is tied to a philosophical vision of reality as eternal order. This conception of beauty has nothing in common with beauty as the “pathos of things” (*mono no aware*) – the dominant aesthetic category in Heian period Japan (8–12 century) – which was related to Buddhist reflection on the transience and changeability of everything that exists.

I will treat the different types of beauty as characterized aesthetic values, as opposed to beauty in a general sense. Such aesthetic values always have both subjective and objective character, as they do not simply belong to the object (axiological objectivism), nor are they determined solely by the subject (axiological subjectivism). Man establishes aesthetic values only when in contact with the world of things, which inspires him. The final result depends on which aspects of reality he pays attention to and how he interprets them.

In my opinion, aesthetic values in Zen art are also connected with reflection on the structure of reality – specifically, reality as experienced in the act of Enlightenment (*satori*). According to Nishida Kitarō, Zen art – which he describes as “art expressing absolute nothingness” (that is, nothingness being the contradictory identity of form and emptiness) – expresses ‘the space of the self’ (*shin no kūkan*).² He emphasizes that the notion of the self should be understood in the context of the logic of Zen paradox³ as the absolutely contradictory self-identity of immanence and transcendence. ‘The space of the self’ is “the self, which is Buddha” (*shin soku butsu*)⁴, that is, ‘the ultimate topos’ (*kyūkyokuteki basho*), in which “one is all, and all is one” (*ichi soku issai issai soku ichi*). Space thus conceived can be regarded as time-space, since absolutely contradictory self-identity also has a temporal dimension as ‘the eternal now’ (absolute contradictory self-identity of past and future). Art that expresses the absolutely contradictory self-identity of the absolute sphere (*sacrum*) and the relative sphere (*profanum*) is the art of ‘immanent transcendence’.

² Nishida Kitarō, *Rekishiteki keisei sayō to shite no geijutsuteki sōsaku*, Nishida Kitarō zenshū, vol. 10, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1979, p. 315.

³ More on the subject of the logic of paradox in the teachings of Zen masters: Agnieszka Kozyra, *Nishida Kitarō's Logic of Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity and the Problem of Orthodoxy in Zen Tradition*, “Japan Review” 2008, No. 20; Agnieszka Kozyra, *Paradokusuteki nihirizumu – Nishida to Heideggā*, “Nihon kenkyū” 2006, No. 33; Agnieszka Kozyra, *Filozofia zen*, Wydawnictwo PWN, Warszawa 2004.

⁴ Nishida Kitarō, *Rekishiteki keisei sayō to shite no geijutsuteki sōsaku*, op. cit., p. 335.

Nishida held that the line is abstract in the paintings expressing ‘absolute nothingness’, seemingly devoid of expression, in contrast to the highly dynamic line in gothic art. Lines look as if they have no beginning or end, which is why they express the identity of absolute reality and sensory reality. This is because they indicate interpenetration of all forms, which are not perceived as separate existences. Lines in the art of ‘absolute nothingness’ are also an instance of the spontaneous manifestation of everything in the universe (*jinen hōni*)⁵, expressing the Buddhist teaching that the self is Buddha.⁶

Nishida points out that in the presence of the art of ‘absolute nothingness’, one may have the impression that the subject becomes absorbed by the objects it is experiencing. This becomes immediately evident when we compare a tea pavilion with the pyramids, the Parthenon or a gothic cathedral.⁷ In the case of tea pavilions, space/ surroundings do not constitute the opposite of the subject, because it is ‘the space of the self’, that is, the absolutely contradictory self-identity of the subject and object.

The art of ‘absolute nothingness’ is neither symbolic nor mystic. It is the art of the ‘fluid self’ (*jūnanshin*)⁸, which is not a closed self, that is, a self separate from the world.

It should be emphasized that the world accessible through sensory experience is not denied or rejected in the act of Enlightenment, since it regarded as an aspect of absolutely contradictory self-identity. Enlightenment is not based on rejecting the ordinary perception of reality, but on discovering its other, heretofore unperceived bottom, which constitutes the unity of everything. “It [Enlightenment] is not spirituality consisting in the expression of eternal life, but spirituality that enables heaven and earth to be contained in a tea bowl (*kuroraku no chawan⁹ ni tenchi o tsutsumu*)”.¹⁰ Writing these words, Nishida emphasizes that the art of ‘absolute nothingness’ must express the Buddhist teaching that “one is all”. The art of nothingness must also express affirmation of the ordinary perspective, characteristic of Zen – “the ordinary self is the way” (*byōjōshin kore dō*)”.¹¹ In Western art the material expresses the spiritual, but a dualism of spirit and matter is maintained. However in Eastern art which expresses ‘absolute nothingness’, spirit and matter are absolutely contradictorily self-identical (*shinshin ichinyo*) – they cannot be split apart, just as reality accessible to the senses and reality in itself cannot

⁵ Ibid., p. 335 The notion *jinen hōni* (spontaneously compliant with the law) appears *inter alia* in the teachings of Shinran (1173–1262), the founder of the True Pure Land school, and refers to the manifestation of the ‘nature of Buddha’.

⁶ Nishida Kitarō, *Rekishiteki keisei sayō to shite no geijutsuteki sōsaku*, op. cit., p. 333.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Kuroraku no chawan (kurorakujawan)* – black-glazed tea bowl with irregular shapes and a rough surface, considered to be the embodiment of ‘noble poverty’ (*wabi*) style. According to traditional accounts, tea ceremony master Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591) asked Chōjirō (d.1589), one of the artisans contributing to the construction of Jūrokudai castle, to make just such a bowl for tea. Chōjirō’s successors, Jōkei (d. 1635) and his son Nankō (1599-1656) specialized in the production of bowls in this style.

¹⁰ Nishida Kitarō, *Rekishiteki keisei sayō to shite no geijutsuteki sōsaku*, op. cit., p. 334.

¹¹ Ibid.

be sundered.¹² According to Nishida, the art of ‘absolute nothingness’, which arose in the East, expresses (in accordance with the logic of paradox) “form without form, voice without voice” (*katachi naki katachi, koe naki koe*) and “depth without depth” (*fukasa naki fukasa*)¹³, that is ‘immanent transcendence’.

Nishida’s thoughts concerning art that expresses ‘absolute nothingness’ inspired me to attempt to redefine Zen art in my book *Aesthetics of Zen*.¹⁴ Nishida called attention to the fact that Zen art expresses the truth that “one is all, and all is one” and maintains an ordinary perspective on reality. I thus concluded that Zen art should also express other aspects of reality experienced in the act of Enlightenment, i.e. reality of absolutely contradictory self-identity. These aspects are: “one is all, all is one” (going beyond the dualism of subject and object of cognition); “form is emptiness” (insubstantiality), “emptiness is form” (affirmation of the ordinary perspective); contradictory unity of opposites (e.g. motion-stillness, sacred-non-sacred); ‘the eternal now’ (absolute contradictory self-identity of past and future); ‘absolute freedom’; beauty in any form (asymmetry, deformation, breaking rules and cannons); the state of ‘non-self’ (*mushin*), i.e. the state of absolute contradictory self-identity of a subject and objects) as a source of creative powers.¹⁵

The aesthetic ideal in the context of Zen philosophy appears to be the beauty of the state of ‘non-self’ (*muga*)¹⁶, the beauty of “form without form”. Beauty in Zen art is “agreement with the norm”, with the norm being established by the law of contradictory nature of reality, which is uncovered in the act of enlightenment. Nishida would no doubt agree with Hegel’s conclusion that the truth about reality, arduously uncovered by philosophy, is immediately revealed in aesthetic experience. Zen art’s calling is to reveal the truth about the essence of reality in the form of sensuous artistic works. Nishida Kitarō regarded beauty as a manifestation of the state of ‘non-self’ to be the highest aesthetic ideal, though of course not everybody has to agree with his opinion. It should be noted that Nishida sought supreme beauty in the sphere of immanent transcendence, not in sphere of transcendence as Plato did.

The different types of beauty that Japanese artists strove to express in their works have specific names. It’s impossible to find equivalents for many of them in Western aesthetic categories – for instance, for the three aesthetic values most frequently associated with Zen tradition: ‘mysterious depth’ (*yūgen*), ‘noble poverty’ (*wabi*) and ‘patina of time’ (*sabi*).

The starting point of our inquiry will be aesthetic categories in Japanese poetry, because they have always exerted great influence on art in Japan. Some aspects of the aesthetic categories discussed will merely be indicated; some – those unrelated to Zen –

¹² Ibid., p. 315.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Agnieszka Kozyra, *Estetyka Zen*, Wydawnictwo TRIO, Warszawa 2010.

¹⁵ In *Estetyka Zen*, I searched for aspects of absolutely contradictory self-identity in the types of art customarily associated with Zen – mainly in ink painting, dry landscape gardens, Nō theater and the tea ceremony.

¹⁶ Non-self (*muga*) – in Zen Buddhism this notion is interpreted as non-existence of a separate self, since a self (a subject) is absolutely contradictorily identical with the world (all objects).

will be bypassed entirely, since they raise issues that deserve separate, in-depth analysis. It should be noted that *yūgen*, *wabi* and *sabi* were recognized to be the quintessence of Japanese aesthetics in Japan only in the 1930's, when it became fashionable among intellectuals to seek out "Japaneseness".¹⁷

This article aims to show that *yūgen*, *wabi* and *sabi* deserve to be called aesthetic values of Zen art only when their definition complies with the logic of absolute contradictory self-identity (the logic of paradox). Some definitions of *yūgen*, *wabi* and *sabi* are not paradoxical and therefore they cannot be linked to Zen. I will try to prove that one must be aware of the ambiguity of the aforementioned types of beauty – their meanings cannot be narrowed to fit only within the realm of Zen tradition.

‘Mysterious depth’ (*yūgen*)

The notion of ‘mysterious depth’ (*yūgen*)¹⁸ first appeared in anthologies of poetry and in Taoist writings to describe that which is hidden and mysterious.¹⁹ This word appeared in Japan for the first time in the treatise *Isshin kongō kaitaiketsu* (*Reflections on the dictates of the diamond blade of the self*) written by Saichō (767–822), the founder of the Japanese Tendai school, to describe Buddhist teaching whose depth rendered it impossible for the mind to comprehend. It was in the context of Buddhism that ‘mysterious depth’ began to refer to the dimension of the eternal and immutable, though hidden in the world of changeable and transient phenomena.

It should be noted that the word *yūgen* also occurs in Zen texts – namely, in *Notes of the Teachings of Master Linji* (*Rinzairoku*) in the context of Buddhist teachings.²⁰

We can find the earliest mention of *yūgen* in the literature of Japan in *Manajo*, the preface to *Kokinwakashū* (*Collected Japanese Poems of Ancient and Modern Times*, 905) attributed to Ki no Yoshimochi (?–919), in which the word still had strong religious connotations. The analysis of *yūgen* that went into the greatest depth can be found in the critical-literary treatises of Fujiwara Shunzei (1114–1204). Shunzei was influenced by the teachings of the Tendai school, especially the theory of meditation presented in the treatise entitled *Great Concentration and Insight* (chin. *Mohe zhiguan*, jap. *Makashikan*, 594) by Zhiyi (jap. Chigi, 538–597). As Mikołaj Melanowicz has rightly noted, “Shunzei’s best poems arose from religious discipline, concentration and deep insight (*shikan* in the Tendai sect), from the search for fundamental characteristics or the essence of things (*hon’i*) in experience. The search, however, has a specific goal – namely, finding beauty”.²¹ In

¹⁷ Ienaga Shigemi, *Yūgen, wabi, sabi. Nihonteki naru mono no sōsei to sono haikai*, “Aida” 2005, No. 111, p. 29.

¹⁸ The word is written with two characters: *yū* (chin. *yu*): indefinite, deep, barely visible, indistinct, with indistinctness meaning negation of substantiality; and *gen* (chin. *xuan*): dark, murky, inscrutable.

¹⁹ Taniyama Shigeru, *Yūgen, Kadokawa Shoten*, Tōkyō 1982, p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

²¹ Mikołaj Melanowicz, *Literatura japońska. Od VI do połowy XIX wieku*, PWN, Warszawa 1994, p. 244.

poetry, *yūgen* was expressed by echoes hidden in words, or by an indescribable ambience evoked by a verse.²²

Kamo Chōmei (1154–1216) devoted much attention to ‘mysterious depth’ in his treatise *Mumyōsho* (*Treatise Without a Title*). He maintained that *yūgen* describes a feeling that’s not fully expressed yet extraordinarily suggestive. This feeling is rather beyond words, outside of the structure of the poem, cannot be reduced to a concrete element. According to him, *yūgen* expresses the face and figure of a woman who, though offended and hurt, tries not to show her feelings. This sort of suppressed expression is more moving than a vehement outburst of anger and jealousy.²³ A grey, misty autumn landscape also expresses ‘mysterious depth’ well.²⁴

Fujiwara Teika (1162–1241) associated *yūgen* with an image of a beautiful, subtle woman full of grace. The subject of the poems he analyzed in respect to ‘mysterious depth’ was primarily love. It was in the sense of ‘elegance and good taste’ that *yūgen* came to be used toward the end of the Heian period not only in *waka* poetry²⁵, but also in other fields of Japanese cultural life. It should be noted that the definitions of ‘mysterious depth’ arrived at by Kamo Chōmei and Fujiwara Teika lie outside the religious sense of *yūgen*.²⁶

The term *yūgen* started to be associated with the *renga* poetry style²⁷, *inter alia*, due to an inquiry into this subject by Nijō Yoshimoto (1320–1388). He began to combine *yūgen* with youthful verve, thereby moving away from word’s hitherto meaning of subdued expression.²⁸ Never before had the definition of *yūgen* strayed so far from its Buddhist roots.

Zen monks who were also poets wrote about the notion of *yūgen*. Shōtetsu (1381–1459), a Rinzai school monk associated with Tōfukuji temple, declared that *yūgen* as “the beauty of elegance and charm“ (*karei yōen*) is tied to subtlety of expression, hidden depth and a feeling of transience. This is why ‘mysterious depth’ is expressed by the moon shining through a thin layer of clouds or by dew shining on the autumn leaves of maple trees.²⁹ Shinkei (1406–1475), a disciple of Shōtetsu, emphasized that true beauty lies not in perfect forms, such as a full moon or a flower in bloom. According to him, *yūgen* beauty is expressed by one small flower of a white plum hidden in a bamboo

²² Nogami Toyochirō, *Nō no yūgen to hana*, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1943, p. 3.

²³ Andrew T. Tsubaki, *Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of Yūgen: Note on Japanese Aesthetics*, “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, 1971, No. 1, Autumn, p. 58.

²⁴ *Traditional Japanese Art and Culture*, red., Stephen Addis, Gerald Groemer, J. Thomas Rimer, University of Hawai’i Press, Honolulu 2006, p. 93.

²⁵ *Waka* – poetry in the Japanese language (in contrast to poetry in Chinese composed in Japan, called *kanshi*). The best-known form of Japanese poetry is so-called “short song” (*tanka*), consisting of 31 syllables.

²⁶ Taniyama Shigeru, *Yūgen*, op. cit., pp. 134–136.

²⁷ *Renga* – “linked song” in Japanese, consisting of five verses that are, successively, 5, 7, 5, 7, 7 syllables long.

²⁸ Andrew T. Tsubaki, op. cit., p. 60.

²⁹ Haga Kōshirō, *Wabi no kenkyū*, Tankōsha, Kyōto 1978, p. 144.

thicket, or the moon barely shining through the clouds.³⁰ In *Sasamegoto* (*Whispers*, 1463), a critical-literary treatise on the subject of *renga* poetry, Shōtetsu deemed *yūgen* to be a type of subdued beauty associated with quietude and solitude.³¹

In conclusion, the notion of *yūgen* in poetry primarily means the expression of feelings in an indirect manner with the help of subtexts, and is associated with an ambience of melancholy, grace and mystery.³² It has been associated with sophistication and with evocative allusion, also with elegance achieved paradoxically by using ordinary and simple words. ‘Mysterious depth’ is expressed the most fully in a poem whose simple style conveys depth of feeling – such poetry is able to “move Heaven and Earth” and “soften the hearts of gods and demons”.³³ It should be emphasized, however, that reflections on the meaning of ‘mysterious depth’ in poetry often omitted any religious context. Literalness, ostentation and pathos are avoided in the literature and art of various cultures, thus this set of aesthetic preferences cannot be restricted to Buddhist inspiration.

It’s noteworthy that in his theory of *yūgen* in Nō theater, Zeami was under the influence of critical-literary treatises devoted to this notion.³⁴ In Zeami’s own treatises we can distinguish two meanings of the term ‘mysterious depth’. The first, which appeared mainly in his earlier works³⁵, is reminiscent of the views of Fujiwara Teika, who considered *yūgen* to mean grace, refinement and elegance. As Andrew T. Tsubaki has rightly noted, Fujiwara Teika’s definition of *yūgen* was widely accepted by Japanese elites in the 14 and 15 Centuries.³⁶ In *Fūshikaden*, Zeami contrasted *yūgen* style with *tsuyoki* style (vehement/strong). Zeami wrote that Ashikaga Yoshimitsu definitely preferred actors who were able to express *yūgen*. In the chapter entitled *Kakyō*, which is entirely devoted to ‘mysterious depth’, Zeami stated that he considers this notion to be the ultimate ideal of all arts. Although he mainly saw *yūgen* in the highly graceful and elegant behavior of the aristocracy, he wrote that even an actor playing the role of a simple man (e.g. woodcutter) must express *yūgen* – the actor must not try to realistically present such a character, because then he would have to be boorish and vulgar.³⁷ Zeami stressed that *yūgen* must be expressed regardless of the role – whether playing a mad man, jealous woman or warrior, the actor should not express excessive anger or vehemence, but always act in a subdued manner.³⁸ The expression of *yūgen* requires an actor to make great effort and undertake constant self-improvement, because it does not consist in displaying innate

³⁰ Ibid., p. 146.

³¹ We can speak about *yūgen* beauty (like *wabi* beauty or *sabi* beauty) as one type of beauty, that is, one of the many aesthetic ideals created by human beings.

³² Nogami Toyochirō, *Nō no yūgen to hana*, op. cit., pp. 6–7.

³³ Andrew T. Tsubaki, op. cit., p. 59.

³⁴ Nishio Minoru, *Zeami no nōgeiron*, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1975, p. 444.

³⁵ In Zeami’s early treatises, the category ‘flower’ (*hana*) played a very important role, as it meant the originality and inimitability of an actor’s acting, which catches the attention of the audience. See Konishi Jin’ichi, *Nōgakuron kenkyū*, Danshōbō, Tōkyō 1964, p. 150.

³⁶ Andrew T. Tsubaki, op. cit., p. 61.

³⁷ Zeami, *Fūshikaden*, in: *Nihon shisōshi taikai*, vol. 24, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1974, p. 20.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 48.

grace. The actor must not only imitate the elegant behavior and graceful movements of an aristocrat, but should also learn to compose poetry and develop good taste – for instance, in selecting and matching materials for costumes.³⁹ Shōtetsu associated *yūgen* with the sight of a beautiful lady in exquisite attire strolling around a garden full of flowers. Zeami initially encountered this definition of *yūgen* – i.e. charm, grace and elegance.⁴⁰ It's not surprising, then, that when expressing this aspect of 'mysterious depth', Zeami used the metaphor of a "swan holding a flower in its bill".⁴¹

The second meaning of *yūgen* in Zeami's writings goes beyond elegance, charm or mastering *nō* theater acting technique, as we can discern in it the influence of the logic of absolute contradictory self-identity (the logic of paradox). Zeami cautions against the type of grace and charm that is associated solely with weakness and fragility. According to him, *yūgen* must also be expressed in the roles of aggressive and vehement characters. Thus, it does not simply mean "charm" associated with girlish delicacy – it must also contain strength.⁴² These are completely different types, which is why the actor should choose the appropriate acting technique in order to express the different characters of these two types of roles while maintaining charm and elegance in his acting. Likewise when playing an old man, the actor should not imitate the awkward, ungainly movements of the aged – instead, his acting should be full of charm and elegance and convey the old man's sense of dignity. Zeami compares this type of acting to "an old tree on which a flower blooms" (*oiki ni hana ga sakan ga gotoshi*). What's more, Zeami emphasizes that *yūgen* is always tied to allusion and suppression of feelings, in accordance with the principle "out of ten agitations of the heart, express seven of them with your body" (*kokoro o jūbun ni ugoakashite, mi o shichibu ugokase*).⁴³ The point is not to express less, but to express everything, though in a condensed form, because the majority of the play's content must be conveyed as a kind of echo that's hard to pin down yet audible nonetheless. The audience experiences beauty, but is unable to attribute it to any specific element of the play.

This definition of *yūgen* contains an internal contradiction that consists of combining opposing aspects (delicacy and strength) together with the conviction that only suppressed (incomplete) expression is full expression. An internal contradiction also lies in acting technique: dynamism and calm are combined in each movement of the body – if the actor forcefully stomps his foot, the upper part of his body should be calm and relaxed.⁴⁴

³⁹ Zeami, *Kakyō*, in: *Nihon shisōshi taikai* vol. 24, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1974, p. 97–98.

⁴⁰ Toyochirō Nogami, *Zeami and His Theories on Nō*, (trans. Ryōzō Matsumoto), Hinoki Shoten, Tōkyō 1973, pp. 52–53.

⁴¹ Zeami, *Shikadō*, in: *Nihon shisōshi taikai*, vol. 24, Iwanami Shoten, Tōkyō 1974, p. 118.

⁴² Zeami, *Fūshikaden*, op. cit., p. 60.

⁴³ Zeami, *Kakyō*, op. cit., p. 84.

⁴⁴ Zeami, *Fūshikaden*, op. cit., p. 61. Combining motion and motionlessness in dance is also sometimes interpreted in the context of the harmony of *ying* and *yang*.

And vice-versa – when his legs move gently, his upper body should be taught and its movements rapid and sharp.⁴⁵

A unity of opposites is also visible when the actor stands still/pauses (*ma*), which “is not stillness, but a perfect balance of opposing forces”.⁴⁶ Zeami stated that pauses are the most difficult for an actor, because then he has to keep the audience’s attention focused on himself. It’s important that the actor not cease acting when he stops on stage – he cannot “turn himself off” or relax. The whole time he must remain as one with the character he is playing. If he succeeds in doing so, then his motionlessness will make a bigger impression on the audience than stage movement. In a certain sense, the equivalent of *ma* in ink-wash painting is *yohaku* – that is, empty space that is not background, but an equally important element of the composition. Empty space in Zen painting must express the precept that “emptiness is form”. In the context of Zen philosophy, stillness/pause is ‘the eternal now’, that is, the present moment that contains in itself all other moments (past and future). This is why the actor’s stillness is dynamic – it’s not a break in expression, but a culmination of expression. As Masaru Sekine has justifiably shown, many aspects of *nō* theater acting, including the expressiveness of stillness, are clearly religious in character.⁴⁷

It’s the treatment of *yūgen* as a harmony of opposites that constitutes Zeami’s original contribution to the term’s interpretation. Only the second definition of *yūgen* (‘mysterious depth’ as a unity of opposites) in Zeami’s writings can be linked to Zen, owing to its consistency with the logic of paradox.

In Zeami’s treatises, however, the highest level of acting is not *yūgen*, but the ‘Miraculous and Mysterious Flower’ style (*myōka*), which is an instance of the state of ‘non-self’ (absolute contradictory self-identity of a subject and objects). Most likely, Zeami sought a term associated with the concept of Enlightenment, thus a word with religious coloring, which is why he chose *myō*. This word frequently appears in Tendai school writings, as it is used to describe the miraculous and mysterious knowledge of the *Lotus Sutra* (*myōhō*).

The notion of *yūgen* also appears in the writings of Zenchiku, though with a somewhat different sense than in Zeami’s works.⁴⁸ In *Six Circles, One Dewdrop*, the notion of *yūgen* does not mean the elegance and charm that a *nō* actor should learn from the aristocracy. Instead, Zenchiku immediately links *yūgen* with a state of the self expressed by the first three circles – Circle of Full Life (*Jurin*), Circle of Growing (*Shurin*) and Circle of Abiding (*Jūrin*). In these circles, the actor expresses *yūgen* in every gesture and movement.⁴⁹ “The Circle of Full Life is the ultimate source of ‘mysterious depth’ (*yūgen*) of dance and song. It’s the vessel from which emotions emerge when we admire

⁴⁵ Zeami, *Kakyō*, op. cit., p. 85.

⁴⁶ R.H. Blyth, *Eastern Culture*, Hokuseidō, Tokyo 1949, p. 146.

⁴⁷ Masaru Sekine, *Zeami and His Theories of Noh Drama*, Colin Smythe, Gerrard Cross 1985, p. 95.

⁴⁸ Haga Kōshirō, *Zenchiku no nōgakukan to biteki rinen*, in: *Zen to nōgaku, cha*, Kumakura Isao, ed., Perikansha, Tōkyō 1997, pp. 346–347.

⁴⁹ Zenchiku, *Rokurin ichiro no ki chū*, op. cit., p. 338.

an actor's movements and listen to his singing. It is called the Circle of Full Life due to its perfection and longevity".⁵⁰

Zenchiku associates the first three circles with the Tendai doctrine about the 'three truths' – respectively, with emptiness (absolute dimension), temporality/ that which is provisional (relative dimension) and 'the middle way', that is, unity of the absolute and relative dimensions.⁵¹ In accordance with Tendai teaching, these three truths essentially constitute one truth, because the absolute aspect is present on all three levels – it's a different way of expressing the absolutely contradictory self-identity of nirvana and sansara. Zenchiku also wrote that "Buddha nature, corresponding to the immaculacy of these three circles, is like a clean mirror".⁵² The three first circles thus describe different aspects of reality as experienced in the act of enlightenment.

The actor who has maintained his state of self as symbolized by the first three circles is able to manifest *yūgen* in the other circles⁵³, commencing with the Circle of Forms (*Zōrin*), in which imitation (*monomane*) is also present as an acting technique.⁵⁴ Zenchiku stresses that *yūgen* is not the result of mastering the technique of acting. The dancing of an actor who does not rely on technique, but blends his movements into perfect form, that is, into "the breath of dance", displays "the life of dance" (*mai no inochi*) and becomes a source of *yūgen*.⁵⁵ Thus, the most important aspect is the actor's state of self – if it remains in the first three circles, then the actor's singing expresses mysterious beauty (*yūbi*), and his dancing expresses charm, even if he breaks the rules and canons.⁵⁶

I should be noted that Zenchiku also links *yūgen* with 'the three secrets' (*sammitsu*) of the Buddhist Shingon school.⁵⁷ According to Shingon teaching, the entire body (*shin*) must be directed toward enlightenment during religious practice, thanks to all the senses being concentrated on particular elements of ritual (smell – on the scent of incense; taste – on the flavor of special herbs chewed by monks; hearing – on music and Buddhist recitations; sight – on images of Buddha or holy symbols). All movements are precisely defined, while the body is immobilized in a meditation posture with arms folded in a mudra (*ingei*). The secret of speech (*ku*) means repeating mantras (*shingon*), the language of enlightenment. The mind (*i*) must contemplate a mandala or image of Buddhist – thus, the imagination and feelings, too, are engaged in religious practice. Zenchiku suggests that by way of his body (dance), mouth (song) and mind (concentration), the actor achieves the same

⁵⁰ Zenchiku, *Rokurin ichiro no ki*, op. cit., p. 324.

⁵¹ Arthur Thornhill III, *Six Circles, One Dewdrop. The Religio-Aesthetic World of Komparu Zenchiku*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 1993, p. 166.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵³ The other circles are: Circle of Form (*Zōrin*), Circle of Transgression (*Harin*) and Circle of Emptiness (*Kūrin*).

⁵⁴ Zenchiku, *Rokurin ichiro no ki*, op. cit., p. 327.

⁵⁵ Zenchiku, *Rokurin ichiro no ki chū*, op. cit., p. 336.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

⁵⁷ Arthur Thornhill III, *Six Circles, One Dewdrop. The Religio-Aesthetics World of Komparu Zenchiku*, op. cit., p. 167.

state as a meditating monk in Shingon, who by way of the ‘three secrets’ experiences the dimension of the absolute, that is, unity with Buddha Mahāvairocana (jap. Dainichi).⁵⁸

In his inquiry into the topic of *yūgen*, Zenchiku refers to the doctrines of Tendai and Shingon, but not Zen. It is thus a Buddhist interpretation, but because it lacks the aspect of unity of opposites, it is difficult to regard Zenchiku’s ‘mysterious depth’ as a Zen aesthetic category.

The notion of *yūgen* has also been used in the context of the tea ceremony – Murata Shukō (1423–1502) referenced the notion of ‘mysterious depth’ when explaining why he used plain, irregular ceramics from Bizen and Shigaraki in the tea ceremony, citing the following verse from *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*) by Yoshida Kenkō (?1283–1350): “The sight of a moon on a cloudless night does not delight me”.⁵⁹ A full moon, regarded as a perfect form, was admired in Japan on cloudless autumn nights. In contrast to this fondness for perfect forms, Yoshida Kenkō and Murata Shukō considered the indistinct shape of the moon shining through clouds to be the ideal of beauty. Shukō strove to achieve this ideal in the tea ceremony, combining exquisite Chinese porcelain with rustic domestic implements. Murata’s words – that a stately steed looks even more beautiful when standing in a modest stable, and precious utensils look even more exquisite when set among plain objects – can be interpreted in two ways. The first does not have anything in common with Zen if the plain objects are regarded merely as a background for true works of art. But if the exquisite, embellished objects are placed together with modest, rough-hewn ones on an equal footing, then Murata can be said to have observed the principle of unity of opposites characteristic of Zen.

I would like to refer also to contemporary definitions of *yūgen*. According to Suzuki Daisetsu, wherever there is the shine of enlightenment (*satori*), creative energy is present, and when this energy is felt, art “breathes *yūgen*”.⁶⁰ Suzuki identified *yūgen* with *myō* (wonderful and mysterious), a notion that Zeami considered to express the state of ‘non-self’. A work of art expressing ‘mysterious depth’ enables the beholder to peer into ‘emptiness’. Although this is only a momentary look, it leaves an impression of having encountered something unknown, alluring. Experiencing *yūgen*, much the same as experiencing enlightenment, is fully communicable only between those who have experienced it. Suzuki Daisetsu emphasized that art which expresses ‘mysterious depth’ enables us to behold that which is eternal in a world of constant flux.⁶¹ Here we are dealing with the logic of paradox – eternity is present in impermanence. Suzuki also refers to the metaphor of the moon behind clouds, but emphasizes the aspect of simultaneous presence and absence, since we feel the presence of that which is hidden behind the clouds. For Suzuki, *yūgen* is the aesthetic aspect of Enlightenment.

⁵⁸ Buddha Mahāvairocana (literally: ‘Great Brightness’; jap. Dainichi) the most important Buddha in the Shingon school, identified with a ‘cosmic body’ (*hosshin*), thus with the universe.

⁵⁹ Sen Sōshitsu XV, *Chanoyu – The Urusenke Tradition of Tea*, Weatherhill, New York 1988, p. 14.

⁶⁰ Suzuki Daisetsu, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, Princeton University Press, New York 1970, p. 220.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Izutsu Toshihiko wrote that “[yūgen] is beauty borne of spiritual inspiration and yearning motivated by a desire to possess sensory images of the inexpressible, extrasensory reality enveloped in eternal silence and remaining a mystery that lies in the very heart of the phenomenal world”.⁶² Toshihiko’s statement on ‘mysterious depth’ shows that he considered *yūgen* to be an expression of the absolutely contradictory self-identity of the absolute and relative spheres only if it’s not a mystery, but “inexpressible, extrasensory reality” that “lies at the very heart of the phenomenal world”.

‘Noble poverty’ (*wabi*)⁶³

Originally, the word *wabi* had decidedly negative connotations – poverty, sadness, abandonment. The verb *wabu* meant ‘to be discouraged and sad’, while the adjective *wabishii* was used to describe that which is miserable, gloomy, dolorous, abandoned. This word most often occurred in the context of unrequited love or life in exile.

However, *wabi* acquired another meaning when was used in the context of the solitude of a hermit who, having grown weary of the empty glamour of a life devoted to constantly competing for honors, chooses a simple and tranquil life in the wild, like the hero of *Hōjōki* (*An Account of My Hermitage*) by Kamo Chōmei.

Likewise in the earlier-mentioned *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*), the word *wabishiki* (poor, wretched, neglected) acquired a new shade of meaning, which can be expressed as “nobly tarnished by the tooth of time”. This sense of the word is illustrated by the response of the monk to the observation that the silk binding of a scroll quickly tatters and frays: “It’s only when the binding wears through on the back and edges, and the nacre crumbles, revealing the bare stick [around which it is wound], that a scroll looks truly beautiful”.

Suzuki defines the term *wabi* as “poverty”, “that which is not fashionable at the given time”, but “has the highest, timeless, universal value”.⁶⁴ *Wabi* means grasping life from the inside, not showing merely that which is superficial, by breaking through conventions that fail to reach the heart of reality. The true beauty expressed by the word *wabi* does not mean the formal perfection of the generally accepted canons of beauty. *Wabi* beauty is

⁶² Toshihiko Izutsu, *Metafizyczne tło teatru nō. Analiza ‘Dziewięciu etapów Zeami’* (*Metaphysical background of nō theater. Analysis of the ‘Nine stage of Zeami’*), in: *Estetyka japońska. Antologia*, Maria Wilkoszewska (ed.), Universitas, Kraków 2006, p. 72.

⁶³ I decided to coin a Polish equivalent of the word *wabi*, though I’m aware that ‘noble poverty’ does not express the multiple meanings of this term. Nevertheless, voluntary ‘noble poverty’ assumes the traits attributed to *wabi* – namely, simplicity, imperfection, modesty and sincerity. Izutsu Toshihiko translated the notion *wabi* as ‘aesthetic asceticism’. See: Izutsu Toshihiko, „Droga herbaty. Sztuka świadomości przestrzennej” (The way of tea. The art of spatial consciousness) in: *Estetyka japońska. Antologia*, op. cit., p. 190. Leonard Koren defines *wabi* as: “the beauty of that which is imperfect, impermanent, incomplete; the beauty of modesty and humility; the beauty of that which is unconventional”. See: Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets and Philosophers*, Stone Bridge Press, Berkeley, 1994, p. 7.

⁶⁴ Suzuki Daisetsu, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, op. cit., p. 23.

beauty expressed in forms that run contrary to these canons – it is rejection of elaborate patterns, avoidance of materials considered to be precious, such as gold or fine porcelain. This sense of ‘noble poverty’ was also associated with a feeling of calm and harmony.

Hisamatsu Shin’ichi emphasized that Zen tradition exerted enormous influence on the aesthetic category *wabi*, which is regarded as one of the most characteristic traits of Japanese art. According to him, *wabi* means poverty in the sense of voluntary resignation from all material goods and social privileges, which thus enabled spiritual values to be fully experienced.⁶⁵

Striving for simplicity, which Murata Shukō considered to be the most important in the tea ceremony, became the beginning of the *wabi* style. Kaga Kōshirō has pointed out that the use of everyday vessels with irregular shapes and rough surfaces in the tea ceremony instead of exquisite Chinese porcelain contributed to the establishment of a new canon of beauty rooted in spiritual, not material values.

Takeno Jōō (1502–1555), who first used the word *wabi* in the context of the tea ceremony, felt that the following poem by Fujiwara Teika (1162–1241) best expresses the spirit of *wabi*:

“A world stripped of deceit in “the month without gods”⁶⁶
From whose sincerity of feelings does this cold autumn rain color the world?

Itsuwari no naki yo narikeri kaminazuki
Tare ga makoto yori shigure someken”.

“Stripping away deceit” means “getting to the essence of things” – *wabi* is just such a stripping away, which leaves nothing but simplicity and complete sincerity. Takeno suggests that the last verse of Teika’s poem (1502–1555). *From whose sincerity of feelings does this cold autumn rain color the world? [impart more intensive hues to everything?]*) suggests that which is beyond words and intellect⁶⁷, thus it indirectly refers to the impossibility of articulating the truth about the essence of reality. The linkage of sincerity and “the month without gods”, that is, the tenth lunar month (the beginning of winter according to the old calendar) is enigmatic. *Shigure* is a light shower in the late autumn or early winter, associated with a chilly feeling and falling leaves (the aspect of “stripping away” and “sincerity”). If we read Zen symbolism into this verse, we could interpret it to mean that the departure of the gods symbolizes transcending the dualism of *sacrum* and *profanum*, which is a necessary condition for achieving enlightenment understood as reaching the true essence of reality.

In another one of Teika’s poems cited by Takeno as an example of *wabi*, the poet expresses his mood at dusk in late autumn. Nothing in what he sees would commonly be

⁶⁵ Hisamatsu Shinichi, *Wabi no Sadō*, Toeisha, Tokyo 1987, p. 125.

⁶⁶ “The month without gods” (*kaminazuki*) – the name of the tenth lunar month refers to the parable about all the Shintō gods going to Izumo temple this month, which is why there are no gods elsewhere in the country.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

regarded as beautiful – there are no spring flowers or crimson maple leaves in autumn.⁶⁸ Furuta Shōkin asserts that this poem clearly combines the notion of *wabi* with the state of ‘non-self’.⁶⁹

“On an autumn evening
 from a thatch-covered hut
 nearby the bay,
 when I look – no flowers
 nor colorful leaves anywhere...

Miwataseba
 hana mo momiji mo
 nakarikeri
 ura no tomaya no
 aki no yūgure”.

The following commentary on this poem can be found in *Nampōroku*:

“The flowers and colorful leaves can be compared to the grandeur of tea prepared in a writer’s study using a shelf daisu. When looking long and hard at the flowers and leaves, an area opens up in which there is not a single thing but the thatch-covered hut by the bay. He who does not know flowers and colorful leaves will not be capable of living in this hut right away. But when he looks at them carefully, then he will notice that melancholy tranquility fills up the thatch-covered hut”.⁷⁰

The phrase “An area... in which there is not a single thing” indicates the notion of emptiness, which is inseparably bound up with the world of forms. He who rejects all forms is unable to live in emptiness, because he would arrive at a false ‘one-sided emptiness’ (*henkū*), emptiness which is not absolutely contradictorily identical with form.

For Takeno, the notion of *wabi* was also linked to openness and creativity. This is borne out by his extraordinary courage in creating a new canon of beauty – the beauty of a humble, thatch-covered hut. Moreover, he emphasized that *wabi* also means true sincerity, which is the source of harmony. True sincerity is present regardless of whether the participants in a tea ceremony agree with each other or not – it is amazing and miraculous (*kimyō*).⁷¹

Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591) conferred one more meaning on *wabi* – ‘vitality in the absence of vitality’, which may be perceived in shoots brimming with life as they sprout forth from under the snow in the early spring.⁷²

⁶⁸ Haga Kōshirō, *Chazen ichimi*, in: *Zen to nōgaku, cha*, Kumakura Isao, ed., Perikansha, Tōkyō 1997, p. 60.

⁶⁹ Furuta Shōkin, *Zencha to sono bi*, in: *Zen to nōgaku, cha*, op. cit., p. 70.

⁷⁰ Nambō Sōkei, *Nampōroku, czyli Zapiski z południowych stron (Nampōroku, that is, Essays from the Southern Areas)* part 2, (translation into Polish by Anna Zalewska) „Silva Iaponicarum” 2004, No. 2, p. 45.

⁷¹ Furuta Shōkin, *Zencha to sono bi*, op. cit., p. 70.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 76.

It was in this context that he cited the following poem, by Fujiwara Ietaka (1158–1237):

“Those who long for flowers,
I would show the spring
in blades of grass emerging from under the snow
in a mountain village”.⁷³

According to Kobori Nanrei, the appearance of the first shoots of green grass from under the snow expresses the spontaneous birth of forms “where there is not a single thing” (emptiness).⁷⁴ It is Kobori Nanrei’s interpretation of Rikyū’s definition of *wabi* that is the closest to the paradoxical logic of Zen, because it focuses on the fact that form is inseparably tied to emptiness. However, another interpretation is possible that has nothing in common with the logic of paradox – i.e. there’s nothing special about green shoots emerging from under the snow, since nature always reawakens after a long winter. This second interpretation appears to be held by Sōshitsu Sen XV, who felt that the verse quoted above expresses the essence of that which is truly spontaneous and natural.⁷⁵

Rikyū most fully expressed the ideal of *wabi* not only in his choice of tea utensils, but also in the composition of the garden by the tea pavilion. This small garden, which should look as if it were untouched by human hands, has no rare plants or rocks with original shapes. It should be frequently watered and give an impression of tidiness, but without artificial interference by man – which is why Rikyū recommended that not all the leaves be raked up in the autumn. There is nothing ostentatious or imposing in a tea garden, whose natural scenery is meant to sooth the senses and calm the mind. Thus, this garden expresses the aspect of naturalness in *wabi*.

According to *Zencharoku* (Records on Zen Style Tea Ceremony), traditionally attributed to Jakuan Sōtaku (17th century), *wabi* style is the key to the tea ceremony style that can be traced back to Murata, Jōō and Rikyū. However, Sōtaku points out that this notion was frequently misconstrued. What he meant were situations when *wabi* was associated with a specific form and not the spirit of Zen. Particularly regrettable was the tendency for many people to claim their high regard for the *wabi*-style tea ceremony and spend a fortune buying utensils regarded as *wabi* masterpieces or building *wabi* tea pavilions.⁷⁶ Sōtaku emphasized that all preferences and tastes are manifestations of attachment to the world of forms, thus signs of ignorance about the true nature of reality. People must not become attached to any specific forms, even those considered to be *wabi*, because this causes them to make distinction. Making distinctions leads to the establishment of the self as distinct/separate from the world of objects it experiences – yet such a feeling of separateness must be transcended in the act of enlightenment. What is more, *wabi*,

⁷³ Kobori Nanrei Sohaku, *Zen and the Art of Tea*, “Chanoyu Quarterly” 1988, No. 55, p. 10.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Robert Plutchow, *The Grand Tea Master. A Biography of Hounsai Soshitsu Sen XV*, Weatherhill, Trumbull 2001, p. 35.

⁷⁶ Jakuan Sōtaku, *Zencharoku*, in: *Nihon shisōshi tetsugaku zensho*, vol. 16, Heibonsha, Tōkyō 1980, p. 249.

which ought primarily to signify simplicity, starts to be associated with extravagance.⁷⁷ This is because many people take a rational approach to *wabi*, believing that they can attain *wabi* aesthetic effects by satisfying certain specified conditions. But *wabi* requires naturalness and spontaneity, thus it's impossible to generate such effects artificially.

Sōtaku defines *wabi* as incompleteness, the feeling that something is missing. This means that the final effect is not completely consistent with the subjective aim.⁷⁸ Sōtaku, when explaining the etymology of the word *wabi*, associates it with another word in which a character read 'wabi' occurs – namely, with *dasei*, which in colloquial usage means 'dejection' and 'discouragement', associated with a no-win situation.⁷⁹ Sōtaku, however, interprets *wabi* as well as *dasei* in a Buddhist spirit, stating that these words do not have negative connotations, since 'unfulfillment' is linked to the virtue of conscious renunciation, conscious withdrawal from the endless pursuit of one's unsatisfied desires. A feeling of contentment – even when the situation is hopeless from the standpoint of other people – is satisfaction that emanates from the spiritual sphere, regardless of one's material circumstances.⁸⁰ In Ryōanji temple, near the tea pavilion, there is a stone water bowl (*tsukubai*) with the inscription "All I know is when to say enough" (*ware tada taru o shiru*). This knowledge is the key to the notion of *wabi*, according to Sōtaku. *Wabi* means finding peace in adverse conditions, it's calmly accepting whatever fate brings without despair, regret, anxiety or envy. Such a state of self is possible only when one is free from attachment to anything – when one does not pursue any thoughts, or the opposite, that is, does not try to eliminate one's thoughts. When this state is achieved, all 'Six Perfections' (the virtues attributed to bodhisattva: generosity, morality, patience, determination, concentration and wisdom) appear spontaneously, without subjective effort.⁸¹ *Wabi* is usually treated as an aesthetic concept primarily relating to a form (imperfection, simplicity) that evokes particular feelings – solitude or melancholy. Sōtaku, however, interprets *wabi* completely differently, treating it as an expression of Enlightenment, that is, freedom from attachment to all forms and freedom from desire, which is the cause of suffering. This is why he considers the state of *wabi* to be the equivalent of manifesting the 'Six Perfections' of an enlightened being.

The tea ceremony is meditation in motion only when the subject (the person performing the ceremony) is completely absorbed by the objects being experienced (tea utensils). Only when we treat the tea ceremony as a form of meditation meant to negate the individual separateness of the subject (as transcending the dualism of subject and object, which is the aim of Zen practice) does it become clear why Sōtaku used the expression

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 246.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 249 Sōtaku uses the word "stumble" (*sada suru* – the character *wabi* appears in it).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid. These are the "Six Perfections of reaching the other side", that is, attaining enlightenment (jap. *ropparamitsu*).

‘commandments of the Tea Dharma’ (*sahō no kaido*) and required that apprentices perform the tea ceremony full of respect for faith.⁸²

‘Sublime withering’/ ‘Patina of time’ (*sabi*)

Sabi can be traced back to the verb *sabu* (weaken), the adjective *sabishii* (lonely) or the noun *susabi* (desolation). *Sabi* is associated with old age, loneliness and quieting down.⁸³ Itō points out that the notion of *sabi* is inseparably bound up with the Buddhist concept of not becoming attached to the world of forms.⁸⁴ In this sense, *sabi* is acceptance of old age and transience as well as affirmation of all forms, even those not considered to be beautiful due to their absence of vitality. *Sabi* in poetry is also the beauty of spiritual isolation, retreat or seclusion, also dissonance – e.g. alienation associated with “a lone black cypress among blossoming cherry trees”.⁸⁵

The poet Fujiwara no Toshinari (1114–1204) wrote that *sabi* is felt when one looks upon hoarfrost-covered reeds on the water’s edge. *Sabi* has much in common with *wabi*, though it most often refers to the mood evoked by particular things that have lost their vitality or perfect form over time. This is why, in order to distinguish it from *wabi* as ‘noble poverty’, I have termed *sabi* ‘sublime withering’ (in reference to plants) and ‘patina of time’ (in reference to artifacts). Suzuki stated that a feeling of *sabi* is evoked by dilapidated antiques or old objects made with seemingly little competence, due to their rustic unpretentiousness.⁸⁶ Sen Soshitsu XV refers to two poems already discussed herein which express the spirit of *wabi* (about the bayside huts at dusk in autumn, and about the blades of grass emerging from under the snow in a mountain village); however, he also finds *sabi* in these verses, which he associates with particular objects evoking a feeling of solitude – the seaside hut and mountain village.⁸⁷

The poet Bashō felt that *sabi* was expressed best by a *haiku* poem written by one of his pupils, Mukai Kyorai (1651–1704). The poem presents a scene in which two old men are chatting under a flowering cherry tree, contrasting the whiteness of their hair (old age) with the whiteness of the cherry blossoms (prime of life). On the one hand, it evokes a certain nostalgia; on the other hand, it conveys acceptance of transience.⁸⁸ Mukai Kyorai also commented that *sabi* means a combination of old age and vigor, which is visible in the case of an old warrior in magnificent armor.⁸⁹ However, these

⁸² Ibid., p. 250.

⁸³ In the context of the tea ceremony, *sabi* is more often used for objects, and *wabi* for states of mind.

⁸⁴ Itō Kokan, *Cha to Zen*, Shinjūsha, Tōkyō 2004, p. 42.

⁸⁵ Agnieszka Żuławska-Umeda, *Poetyka szkoły Matsuo Bashō (lata 1684–1694)*, Wydawnictwo Neriton, Warszawa 2007, p. 24.

⁸⁶ Suzuki Daisetsu, *Zen and Japanese Culture*, op. cit., p. 24.

⁸⁷ Sen Sōshitsu XV, *The Japanese Way of Tea. From Its Origins in China to Sen Rikyū*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1998, p. 163.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ *Traditional Japanese Art and Culture*, op. cit., p. 145.

two juxtapositions of vitality and its absence are not internally contradictory, because the opposites are contrasted, but not identified with each other. An example of the paradox of vitality and its absence is the previously mentioned metaphor by Zeami about an actor who should be “a flower blooming on a withered tree” – if the tree really is withered, it cannot bloom.

Recognizing that which has withered and chilled to be beautiful (*hiekareta*) is undoubtedly a departure from the canon of beauty associated with colorful flowers or autumn leaves (natural shapeliness, perfection of form, fullness) and is an expression of Buddhist freedom from egocentrism, desires and attachment to this world. The Zen monk and poet Shinkei (1406–1475) wrote that he associated beauty with a feeling of penetrating cold that one feels on a winter morning looking at the thin layer of ice on a pond or the frozen dew on dried-up grass.⁹⁰ This is reminiscent of Fujiwara no Toshinari, who felt *sabi* when looking at hoarfrost-covered reeds at the water’s edge. It can thus be surmised that ‘chilled and withered’ is one of the aspects *sabi*.

It should be noted that Murata Shukō used the notion of *hiyase* in a similar sense, describing his tea ceremony style as ‘chilled and withered’. Murata emphasized that beginners should not imitate this style, because it requires spiritual depth that they do not yet possess. This admonition brings to mind the words of the poet Sōgi (1421–1502), who believed that young poets are unable to express the beauty of that which is chilled and withered, thus they should describe nature in full bloom. Murata felt that the crude, irregular and rustic ceramics from Bizen and Shigaraki expressed the ‘chilled and withered’ style – as opposed to colorful, exquisite Chinese porcelain. Only a tea ceremony master who has plumbed the depths of the *hiyase* style may use vessels from Bizen and Shigaraki; young apprentices must first achieve the spiritual maturity that will enable them to understand the essence of ‘chilled and withered’. Although Murata warned against arrogance and attachment to the self, this does not mean he advocated ridding oneself of individuality and creativity. In accordance with the logic of paradox, Murata combined opposites, which is why he used precious, ornate Chinese vessels as well as *hiyase*-style vessels.

An analogous style exists in ink-wash painting, called “withered and evoking an impression of chill” (*karegashigete samui*). Many Zen painters avoided all embellishment, and the short, straight lines in these works are compared to “snapping a dried-out twig”.⁹¹

The feeling of *hiyase* cannot be reduced to any particular form. Rather, it’s something that eludes the senses, that is felt intuitively – it’s the beauty of stripping bare or revealing the essence of things. Only those who are free of desires and attachment to the world are able to perceive the beauty of wilted grass covered with hoarfrost. Zeami, in his theater treatise *Kakyō* (*A Mirror of a Flower*), wrote about the feeling of chilliness (*hie*) evoked by the acting of a true master, even though he is not putting on a display of technical skills or trying to amaze the audience. The inapprehensible chill he emanates

⁹⁰ Andrew T. Tsubaki, *Zeami and the Transition of the Concept of Yūgen: Note on Japanese Aesthetics*, “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism” 1971, vol. 30, No. 1, p. 60.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

attracts and fascinates his audience. Zeami associates this feeling of chilliness with the state of ‘non-self’ (*mushin*).⁹²

Zen aesthetic values as indirect paradoxical signs

In summarizing the foregoing (necessarily abbreviated) inquiry into Japanese aesthetic categories generally associated with Zen tradition, it should be noted that many definitions of these categories lie outside the logic of paradox and have no religious significance. For example, *wabi* in Bashō’s works expresses the contrast between vitality and its absence (but not the absolutely contradictory self-identity of vitality and the absence of vitality). And the notion of *yūgen* in Japanese poetry could mean elegance and charm or youthful vigor without any religious overtones. The preference for subdued expression exists in various cultures around the world – it can be linked to Zen only when sparseness in means of expression directly or indirectly indicates an internal contradiction in the structure of reality.

It is only when a given aesthetic category can be deemed an indirect paradoxical sign⁹³ that it deserves to be placed in the realm of Zen aesthetic values. An indirect paradoxical sign does not contain internal contradictions in its name, such as direct paradoxical signs (e.g. immanent transcendence), but it is indirectly paradoxical in that its definition is consistent with the logic of paradox. An example of an indirect paradoxical sign is the notion ‘emptiness’, because it is defined as ‘form’ (“emptiness is form, form is emptiness”). *Yūgen*, *wabi* and *sabi* are Zen aesthetic values only in so far as they express at least one aspect of the reality of absolutely contradictory self-identity experienced in enlightenment.

Zeami uses the word *yūgen* in the sense of charm and elegance, thus without any connection to Zen. However, when attributing ‘mysterious depth’ to the internal contradiction of *nō* theater acting (the unity of opposites: motion and stillness, delicateness and vehemence, *sacrum* and *profanum*), Zeami linked *yūgen* to the “Miraculous and Mysterious Flower” style (*myōka*), which is not only the ideal in acting, but also a manifestation of the state of ‘non-self’ in Zen. In my opinion, more attention should be devoted to *myōka* as an aesthetic category defined in an original manner by Zeami himself. The term *myōka*, in contrast to *yūgen*, is not a key concept in medieval Japanese poetic theory. Zeami could have used *yūgen* in his treatise *The Nine Levels* to define the style he considered to be the ideal in acting – but since he didn’t, he must have concluded that this notion already had a wide range of established connotations (including non-religious ones) that would only obscure his argument.

⁹² Dennis Hirota, *Heart’s Mastery: Kokoro no Fumi, The Letter of Murata Shuko to His Disciple Choin*, “Chanoyu Quarterly” No.23 1980, p. 20.

⁹³ For more on indirect paradoxical signs, see: Agnieszka Kozyra, *Nishida Kitarō’s Logic of Absolutely Contradictory Self-Identity and the Problem of Orthodoxy in Zen Tradition*, “Japan Review” 2008, No. 20.

Zenchiku regarded the first three circles of the absolute sphere – ‘Buddha nature’ and the state of ‘non-self’ – to be the source of *yūgen*. In his writings, however, Zenchiku referred to Tendai and not Zen tradition. This is why he appears to have returned to the original meaning of *yūgen* in the poetry of Fujiwara Shunzei.

Wabi means poverty, simplicity and imperfection, but not in a pejorative sense. Not every humble hut is *wabi* style. The same applies to simplicity and imperfection – simplicity in African art has nothing in common with *wabi* style. I also believe it is wrong to regard *wabi* as a synonym for ‘rusticity’. Is a wooden spoon crudely carved by a Polish peasant a *wabi*-style object?

In my opinion, a wealth of forms must lie behind *wabi* simplicity and poverty as a Zen aesthetic category, in accordance with the precept “one is all”. Imperfection may be combined with beauty only when we assume that all forms have ‘Buddha nature’, including those that appear imperfect or marred to us. *Wabi* can thus be regarded as a Zen aesthetic category only as simplicity conveying abundance, poverty concealing a rich interior, imperfection containing fullness. *Wabi* as sincerity does not mean psychological sincerity, but spontaneous manifestation of the true nature of man, which is identical with ‘Buddha nature’. From an ethical standpoint, it’s an expression of ‘great mercy’ and harmony with everything that exists.

We can reach similar conclusions analyzing the category *sabi* in terms of its agreement with Zen teachings. Not everything that is old and worn can be described as *sabi* – not every painting of chill or withered plant evokes such aesthetic experiences. Any form can be regarded as beautiful, if the observer is in a state of ‘non-self’, free from all attachment. It’s hard to imagine the aesthetic shock that was felt when ‘chilled and withered’ things were first recognized to be beautiful. Usually that which appears full of life – flowers in bloom, a young woman’s face, a young man’s vigorous dance – is considered to be beautiful, not withered grass, an old woman’s wrinkled face or movements of an aged man that lack vigor. In his treatises on Nō theater, Zeami used the term *shioretaru* (dried out, faded, lonely, sad) when writing about a very old actor who had to express beauty, even though his vocal and physical capabilities fell far short of those enjoyed by younger actors. The actor faced the most difficult task of expressing beauty present in that which is ‘withered and faded’ – that is, “making the audience perceive a withered tree to be beautiful and subtle”. The only thing that could help him was internal spiritual strength and internal beauty, which can manifest themselves in any form.

Likewise it must have been shocking when heavy, plain *wabi*-style porcelain from Bizen was used instead of fine Chinese porcelain in a tea ceremony for the first time. And what were the tea ceremony participants thinking when Takeno Jōō used an ordinary water bucket, which he called attention to while bathing? It was only due to fashion and snobbery, as well as ignorance of the true spirit of Zen, that people attributed value to such implements. These objects, which no one had paid attention to before, became desirable – especially with collectors willing to pay high prices for them. For example, a vase made from a piece of bamboo, hastily carved out by Rikyū for the needs of a tea

ceremony organized for Hideyoshi during one of his military expeditions, was later sold for the exorbitant sum of 800 pieces of gold (*ryō*).⁹⁴

Many cases of fondness for *wabi*-style utensils were undoubtedly based solely on snobbery and blind imitation. Takeno Jōō was aware of this, which is why he admonished his young apprentices not to use *wabi*-style implements if they had not yet reached an understanding of the essence of *wabi*.

‘Empty space’ (*yohaku*) and ‘stillness/pause’ (*ma*) are also indirect paradoxical concepts, provided that empty space does not mean the absence of form, and stillness does not mean the absence of motion and expression. Empty space in Zen painting suggests a variety of shapes, and stillness in the case of a Nō theater actor in a state of ‘non-self’ contains a wealth of expression. The pause in Nō theater gives an impression of suspending the flow of time, thus it’s a manifestation of the ‘eternal now’. ‘The eternal now’ is a moment that touches eternity – in this state, the actor expresses how one moment contains within itself all other moments. Thus, this momentary stillness is experienced as the dynamism and intensity of condensed expression. The actor in a state of ‘non-self’ congeals in stillness, moving with all space and all time – thus, his acting emanates spiritual strength and creativity, which has nothing in common with acting technique. Zeami emphasized that only an actor in a state of ‘non-self’ can pass from stillness to motion in a harmonious and spontaneous manner. Transcending the dualism of subject and object unites man with the universe, and this unity constitutes the source of spontaneous creativity.

Upon experiencing Enlightenment, reality reveals its absolutely contradictory self-identity – that is why art that does not express any aspect of absolutely contradictory self-identity does not deserve to be called Zen art. The same applies to Zen aesthetic values – their definition must contain an internal contradiction.

Zen aesthetic values are uncovered when the subject, being in a state of ‘non-self’, contemplates the object and uncovers spiritual beauty in it. With reference to Nishida’s views, we can assert that Zen aesthetic values are intuited, though it must be specified that this is aesthetic intuition, which means overcoming of subject-object dualism. Nishida’s ruminations on the disappearance of a separate self in aesthetic experiences are reminiscent of views expressed by Schopenhauer, who was under the influence of Buddhism. Schopenhauer believed that aesthetic contemplation is disinterested and causes cessation of all drives and desires. The main factor in aesthetic pleasure is a feeling of one’s self fading away – losing consciousness of one’s own existence. “Contemplative identification with the object ensues. One loses one’s individuality, exists only as ‘reflection of the object’, in disinterested intuition (not acknowledging the fact that the world really exists) one becomes a pure subject of experience, shorn of will and desires, independent of all practical relations. Randomness, motion, change are left behind – their place is

⁹⁴ Shigenori Chikamatsu, *Stories from a Tearoom Window*, Charles Tuttle Company, Rutland 1982, p. 43. This vase was named Onjōji, because it had a crack that looked like the damage on the bell of Onjōji temple. Hideyoshi did not like this vase, so he threw it to the floor in anger, damaging it.

occupied by the illusion that one is detached from the turmoil that real life brings. Aesthetic experience thus satisfies the aspiration to approach the eternal, the permanent, and to escape from that which transforms, from turmoil, randomness. This contemplation is not emotional in character – one remains emotionally cool in aesthetic experience, as pleasure is derived from intuitive closeness with the object contemplated”.⁹⁵

The above description of the self’s disappearance during aesthetic experience is not a description of Zen aesthetic experience, because the ordinary perspective of perceiving reality is absent. “Detachment from temporality” in Zen art is not simply “detachment from randomness, motion, changes”. When in contact with Zen art, the beholder must experience the internally contradictory unity of “detachment from temporality” and “immersion in temporality”.

Why doesn’t everyone appreciate the beauty of Zen art? The doctrine of beauty as agreement with norms (with the laws of reality) in ancient Greece held that a person who is at odds with the world cannot create or perceive beauty, is not sensitive to its effects. In my opinion, this doctrine also applies to Zen art, except that “being at odds with the world” means forgetting about one’s primal, internally contradictory unity with the world.

⁹⁵ Maria Gołaszewska, *Zarys estetyki*, PWN, Warszawa 1983, p. 320.