

Untranslatable Words: Mono No Aware, and the Aesthetics of Impermanence

By Tim Lomas

Note: This text has been adapted from the original for use in the classroom.

There is a tradition in Japan of communicating the wisdom of Buddhism through aesthetics, or the study of beauty. Japan has developed several art forms — from flower arrangement to swordsmanship, poetry to painting — to communicate spiritual ideas. Among these spiritual ideas are certain emotional “moods” that Zen Buddhism aims to evoke. According to Alan Watts, the three key moods are *mono no aware*, *wabi-sabi*, and *yūgen*.

The term *mono no aware* (物の哀れ) was coined by Motoori Norinaga, the eighteenth century literary scholar, by combining *aware*, which means sensitivity or sadness, and *mono*, which means “things.” Norinaga saw this mood as being at the very center of Japanese culture. The term describes the feelings of sympathy a person feels upon becoming aware of the fleeting, impermanent nature of life. This is captured in the opening of the epic 14th Century Japanese folktale, The Tale of the Heike:

The sound of the Gion shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things...

The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night.

Recognition of the impermanence of life is a central belief of Buddhism. Buddhism holds that life is marked by three key qualities: impermanence, insubstantiality and suffering. Suffering

occurs because humans try, but fail to hold onto the impermanent and insubstantial aspects of life. Buddhism promises that suffering can end if individuals accept the impermanence of life.

This is where *mono no aware* comes in. *Mono no aware* suggests that impermanence should not just be accepted, but appreciated.. This does not mean impermanence is welcomed or celebrated. There is still sadness present in *mono no aware*, a sorrow at the loss of people and things that are precious to us. However, there is also a quiet rejoicing in the fact that we had the chance to witness the beauty of life at all. We are sighing rather than weeping. This mood was captured with particular genius by the poet Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694), arguably the greatest master of the Haiku. Many of his poems are revered as perfectly articulating *mono no aware*, perhaps above all this...

*Summer grasses —
the only remains
of warriors' dreams.*

Moreover, *mono no aware* recognizes that beauty often depends on impermanence. In Zen the most common symbol of *mono no aware* is the cherry blossom, which appears very briefly each spring. Our appreciation of its beauty is heightened by our awareness that the blooms will only last a few days. The cherry blossoms would not seem as beautiful to us if we could view them year round.

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