
Following the Brush

Preparing the ink recalls a student to quiet mindfulness for the practice of *shodo*, Japan's way of the brush. First, the kettle tips, pouring a pool of water onto the cool, flat surface of the *suzuri*, or ink stone. This little cast-iron vessel, not more than three inches in diameter, is surprisingly heavy to lift when its handle is grasped between the index finger and thumb of the right hand. It imitates in miniature a type of kettle traditional to the tea ceremony—the upper half embossed with a network of raised dots, the lid decorated with a slender knob shaped like the stem and basal leaves of an eggplant.

The end of the *suzuri* that faces away holds a hollowed well for collecting the ink. But most of the stone's surface is a plateau where the actual grinding is done. When the stick of ink, or *sumi*, is dipped into the waiting water and rubbed lightly up and down the stone, the round pool stretches into a blackening oval. Some of the ink spills down into the well. As the remainder on top grows thicker and thicker, viscous dimples follow the passage of the stick. A sweet, dusty odor rises, like incense at an altar.

When the ink is ready, the liquid in the well is used to charge and shape the brush. Drawing the bristles back and forth across the more densely laden upper surface then firms the brush's point. By the session's end, the stone will be entirely dry once more, but with a shining stain that shows where the ink was originally ground and where the concentrated residue lay longest.

I look at the wooden calligraphy case on my desk. In addition to the iron kettle, the *suzuri*, and the *sumi*, it contains a black square of felt to support the paper during painting, two long paperweights, and, centered so that it will fit under the barrel-curved lid, the long box that holds my brush. Contemplating this case in which the implements for *shodo* are neatly stowed, I experience the same satisfaction as when inspecting a well loaded backpack or a firmly staked tent. Like those trig emblems of the camping life, the calligraphy box represents release from the world of job and mortgage. My backpack takes me into God's green woods, while the *shodo* chest is the vehicle to an ancient part of eye and spirit. Lifting off the lid on this morning in Vermont, I step back into a practice that began for me last year when my family and I were living in Japan.

My calligraphy teacher Matsuura-sensei exemplified the integration of art and life.

Like many older natives of Kyoto, he kept the nail long on the little finger of his left hand, in order to signal an affinity with the classical tradition originated by the Chinese literati and perpetuated by the monks and artists of medieval Japan. The long nail, initially an economic status-symbol showing that one didn't need to work with one's hands, became over the centuries a token of allegiance to the life of contemplation. It served as a reminder to oneself and others that there was more to the world than getting and spending; that painting, poetry, and gazing at the moon nourish the spirit; and that beauty, more than either competition or shared wealth, deepens friendship.

Like a *shodo* box, Matsuura-sensei's house was a receptacle for this classical culture of China and Japan. Each week I walked through the commercial heart of Kyoto to reach it, crossing the principal north-south avenues of Kawaramachi and Karasuma before entering a neighborhood of warehouses where trucks and delivery vans rattled down the narrow streets. But when I turned down an alleyway into the center of one such industrial block, I came to the teacher's small wooden house, looking like something from a mountain village. Sliding open the double doors of paper and lattice and entering the studio with its *tatami* mats and low work tables, I could look through the room to a garden. Water dripped from a bamboo pipe into a basin hollowed in a stone. One day a kingfisher alit at the basin as I was kneeling to grind my ink. I enter that world again whenever I spread out the felt backing, smooth the paper on it, and, listening to a robin on the maple outside my study window, pick up the brush.

On the table beside me as I practice *shodo* is my *write-hon*, the tall, slender book with a blue fabric cover in which Matsuura-sensei brushed new characters for me to study each week. Within, it holds a single, yard-long piece of paper, folded accordion-fashion. At the top and bottom of each double-page, centered on the fold, my teacher painted a *kanji*, or Chinese character. I can open it flat now to display two or four of his *kanji* from anywhere in the sequence of instruction—stark black figures with a commanding roughness that calls attention to fundamental principles of composition.

Lessons were always the same. I would enter the studio, bow, and kneel facing the teacher's bench, then present sheets of paper with my best versions of the six or eight *kanji* I had been practicing since last time. Matsuura-sensei would grind some red ink and brush over my characters, showing how strokes, endings, or overall proportions should be handled differently. It reminded me of time-lapse photography, with his red flowers emerging from my crinkled black buds. Then, removing the lid from his main ink-stone, he would charge a different brush with black ink and enter new *kanji* in my *write-hon*. I would carry the book over to the students' bench, grind my own ink, imitate the new figures, take my fledgling efforts back up to be overdrawn with red, and go home to work on those same *kanji* for the rest of the week.

This traditional Japanese approach to teaching *shodo* was totally different from all the other educational experiences I have had. Matsuura-sensei never explained any aspect of the practice to me. I learned how to grind the ink, smooth the paper, and wet the brush by watching him the first day. If I wanted to know the proper stroke order for a new *kanji* I had to make sure my mind did not wander as he was entering them in my book. The lessons were not totally devoid of evaluation, though. When

he was brushing over one of my own efforts in red he would occasionally draw a circle beside it to indicate “*yoroshii*”—“that’s fine.” A dot indicated that it was getting there. I never received the harshness of an x, with which wrong answers are marked in Japanese schools. He just left an eloquent blank beside the most heavily re-brushed kanji. These marks graded my kanji in a general way, but they still did not specify what I was to work on. The red version just gave me another chance to study how the *kanji* should really look.

It took me many weeks to see details Matsuura-sensei could easily have mentioned at the outset. Gradually I perceived that the beginnings of strokes were never meant to be straight across or straight up-and-down. Even though I was supposed to hold the handle of the brush perpendicular to the paper, the bristles themselves were to meet the paper at about a forty-five degree angle, with the tip oriented toward the upper left corner of the page. In a rectangular *kanji* like *nichi*, or sun, the upper left corner always allows a little gap, paralleling this same angle, between the beginnings of the initial horizontal and vertical strokes. Often kanji contain two major horizontal strokes, with the lower one serving as a base for the whole figure. In such cases, it eventually dawned on me, the one on top is supposed to have a slightly concave, upward curve while the lower one should curve down into a balancing convex line.

With some details, even after I recognized how they were to look, it took me long hours to figure out how to achieve the right effect. One common pattern has two diagonal strokes spreading out at the bottom of a *kanji*, into a sort of teepee shape. The one on the left ends with a simple curving taper, but the right stroke proved to be my greatest challenge. It begins thin and broadens gradually, as the bristles are bent farther and farther back. Just before it reaches the bottom of the figure, though, there is a shift. The vector of the brush turns more toward the horizontal and the bristles lift quickly from the paper, so that the ink is drawn off into an elongated triangular point like a claw.

Whatever *kanji* I was working on in a given week, I would devote time each night to practicing this elusive stroke. I could only execute it after finally figuring out a couple of related techniques. At the moment of the lateral shift, it was important to pause for a beat. This motionless moment was like the stillness articulating a piece of music or a dance—an axis around which the *kanji* revolved. The other thing that helped me make this stroke was figuring out just how thick to grind the ink. If it was too thin it would spread out when I paused, making a blob where there should have been a clean taper. But if the brush was too dry or the ink too tacky the brush wouldn’t snap back quickly enough to make a point when the downward pressure on the bristles was relieved.

One night I tried this uniquely difficult stroke with the brush my son Matthew used for calligraphy at the neighborhood elementary school. To my amazement I could do it easily every time, using that shorter brush with its stiff brown bristles. The limper gray bristles of my own brush had challenged me to gain skills a crisper one would have made unnecessary—and unattainable. My brush’s floppy and apparently unresponsive nature came to stand for all of the directions my teacher did *not* give me. Through his non-directive teaching he bestowed a practice centered in look-

ing and doing, not in thinking, and released me from the analytical nexus that so easily turns impulses into calculations.

A story I often heard my father tell as I was growing up concerned a certain Chinese gentleman who, because he wanted to become a connoisseur of jade, arranged to have lessons with a famous jade-master. When this man appeared at the appointed place for his first lesson, the master greeted him and, without any further words, placed a piece of jade in his hand and left the room. An hour later the master returned, took the jade, and signaled that the lesson was over. The lessons continued like this for more than a year, with a different piece of jade each time but no explanation. But one week as his teacher handed him the jade the would-be connoisseur finally exploded. "I've devoted a great deal of time and money to studying with you and you haven't taught me a thing. You've never spoken a single word of instruction, and this week the jade you've given me to look at isn't even a particularly distinguished piece." I always liked this joke, less for its intended correction of my own impatience than for the "What?" its punch-line usually provoked from first-time listeners. But it got me laughing in a new way when I realized that, as a *shodo* student, I *was* that exasperated Chinese amateur—learning, though not recognizing how the process worked. After an American education in the liberal arts, where a high value is placed upon self-expression and originality, I was just beginning to glimpse the value, and the challenge, of imitation.

Kanji-practice provided a serene and centering end to busy days in Kyoto. After settling down by grinding the ink, I would sit at the kitchen table in our three-room apartment drawing the brush along the paper in the closest approximation I could manage to the new figures in my *write-hon*. I felt none of the anxiety of creativity that might have dogged me in a western painting course. Instead, there was a feeling of excitement and release. Such imitation is far from a passive exercise. On the contrary, while the most effective teachers I have known in the western tradition reach out to their students, engaging them on their own levels, the traditional Japanese *shodo* teacher is as immovable as a mountain. The journey out of one's own experience is undertaken, instead, by the student. It is an arduous expedition, attempting to trace the routes mapped out by earlier explorers.

The settled dignity of teachers in the Japanese tradition insists that learning is the student's responsibility. Conformity to a clearly defined norm is also considered a privilege, though, and is closely related to the pleasures of group-identity in Japan. We Americans know about some of the problems related to the power of groups in Japanese society, where work can easily become a rat-race and where schools sometimes countenance bullying of students who are perceived as different. But without living in that insular and highly homogeneous country it is difficult for us individualists-on-principle to grasp how intensely gratifying it can be to identify with and participate in one's own cohort.

My favorite image of the *healthy* pleasures of conformity in Japanese schools comes from my daughter's graduation from sixth grade at the Kiyomizu elementary school last April. Though we sometimes imagine from abroad that their hard work must make Japanese kids drones, my wife and I saw a tremendous outpouring of joy and

love on that occasion, expressed through harmonious cooperation. At certain points during the ceremony the whole class of forty would sing a chorus in response to statements by the principal, Narasaki-sensei. The fifth-graders were also in attendance, witnessing the departure of the senior students whom they were now to replace. When the graduates sang their farewell to them, these rising sixth graders answered with their own chorus of good wishes and congratulations. Back and forth they sang, full-voiced and unanimous, as parents, Japanese and *gaijin* alike, wept at the beauty of this transition between seasons. Then, just before the event concluded, the fifth-graders made a final speech to their predecessors. One at a time, they shouted out phrases that joined into a single, collective statement. I have never been more affected by a graduation address than I was as I listened to the boys and girls of that fifth grade, calling their words back and forth across the auditorium in the gathering syntax of community.

Like many Americans with a strong interest in Japanese culture, my original angle of entry was through Zen. I was entranced by the Zen arts especially, that world of spontaneity and dash, with its runny glazes, gnomic utterances, loony gestures—and splashed ink. As I studied with Matsuura-sensei, though, and tried to imitate the proportion and tapers of his gravely drawn characters, I also discovered the place of Confucianism in Japan's tradition. This insistence on hierarchy and form stands on either side of the Zen waterfall, and in one sense is also the rock face hidden behind it. Burn the sutras, says the Zen teacher. But the American student needs to understand the implication that one must first possess them. Similarly, behind the magnificent one-stroke calligraphy of the *enso*, or Zen circle, and the *bokki*, or Zen staff, lie years of training in the way of the brush. Hakuin, the seventh century genius who brought Zen calligraphy to its highest development, first gained the control of eye and hand rooted in *kanji* practice before he launched into the boldness of his paintings.

Respect for the teacher is a venerable Confucianist value, closely associated with the essential Asian value of filial piety. But this respect for authority is in important ways impersonal. Rather than being an innovator, the teacher conveys a tradition and its forms. One Japanese friend, when I described my experience of imitating models supplied by Matsuura-sensei, said that he thought such imitation was fundamentally a form of magic. Confucianism looked back to the mythical sage-kings of China. Because these kings carried out each aspect of their lives ceremonially and with a perfect sense of proportion, the whole land was prosperous. The rains came in season, the earth was bountiful, and the people flourished. My friend explained that Confucianist fidelity to the prescribed forms, both in the arts like calligraphy and in the fulfillment of our duties as family-members and citizens, expressed a belief that if we human beings of a later day could precisely observe the right forms the world itself would become, in that moment, perfect again. Thus, the care with which a *shodo* student grinds ink and makes the first stroke is closely related to the care with which one would recite a magical incantation while raising one hand in a prescribed gesture.

Within such a view the tradition of *shodo* is a pilgrimage, a return through pains-

takingly replicated forms to a present where the world is right. This accords with my sense of the non-explaining teacher as a mountain toward which a student journeys, as well as with my point of view as a western environmentalist. Above all, our global crisis today comes from a carelessness that does not recognize the spiritual meaning and value of our physical world. When we see trees we calculate board-feet. We need to lay down our geometries and trace the exfoliations of a single branch.

The first *kanji* Matsuura-sensei assigned me were the ones associated with days of the week. At the beginning of my struggle to see and execute those deceptively simple forms I was also entering into a meditation on the evocative pictographs for sun, moon, fire, water, tree, metal, and earth. *Ka*, fire, includes the common kanji *hito*, or person. *Hito*'s two diagonal lines, the shorter one meeting the longer about halfway up its leaning length, suggest a stick-figure striding toward the right margin of a page. But in the *kanji* for fire two little strokes hang in the air on either side of the radical-trunk. Is this a dance of flames? A human figure flickering in the hearth? There was no way to answer except by executing the *kanji* over and over, being drawn into its rhythms as I dipped my brush and looked, then looked again.

The *kanji* for water, *sui*, has at its center a single line, while sideways V's, their points toward the center, burst outward from it. This character manifests the splash when a pebble plunks into a still pond and a little star of water leaps out. Subsequent *kanji* suggestive of starbursts echoed this first splash in my mind, unifying the world in new ways. Drawing the six-pointed figure of *bei*, or rice—a cross with short strokes radiating from each of the four angles—I could find in these hard white kernels more of the sustaining crystallizations of water.

This sense of entering into communion with fundamental elements of the earth was further enhanced by working with *kanji* that combined several other characters as component “radicals”—increasingly complex molecules arising from the periodic building blocks. Such *kanji* convey an engaging, elusive poetry, suggesting relationships and pictures while avoiding the reduction of grammatical propositions. One week Matsuura-sensei assigned me the kanji for “wild.” Pronounced *koh* when standing alone and *ara* when compounded with other *kanji*, this character is an elegant construction of three radicals. At the top stands the sign for “flower,” a simple combination of one horizontal line passing through two short verticals. In its smallness and lack of complexity this element makes me think of wildflowers—like the delicate white sorrel growing with their clovery leaves beside our Vermont trails. Below “flower” is the radical for “perish,” itself composed of two radicals. A single dot atop a horizontal line indicates “hat,” while a broad “hook” attached to that line suggests, to my western imagination, the hook where a deceased person's hat hangs, never to be claimed. At the bottom are the three vertical lines of “kawa,” or river, the left one curving further left as it descends, while the one on the right suddenly swirls off in that direction near the figure's base.

In combination with the *kanji* for land, *ara* becomes *arachi*, or “wilderness.” Entering *ara* stroke by stroke, I envisioned Alaska's Brooks Range where, in the short intense summer, flowers overflow the meadows beside rivers rushing with snowmelt

and where, in any season, it would take only one careless slip for a hiker to perish. This romantic image of bones in the wilderness revolved towards a more integrated view as I painted, though, helped by the fact that “perish” is held up and balanced between the river and the flowers, part of the fabric rather than an extraneous side-effect or dramatic contrast. Death in that landscape is not an accident. It is one with the rough surges of life that shove the wilderness into flower, propelling life on its journey across the snow. The poetry of wild landscapes flows into the long column of compounds which are formed by combining *ara* with various other *kanji*. Among these are the characters for rough seas, high mountains, courage, sexual indulgence, ruin, robbery, and eagles—painting a world of attractive danger, ironic connections.

Walking across town to Matsuura-sensei’s house I made my way first through the throngs of Gion, Kyoto’s entertainment district, then passed the business district, its air filled with the din of construction and the fumes of bus exhaust. Turning down the alleyway where the teacher waited serenely behind his sliding door always felt like stepping back into a sustaining memory. At the edge of evening, in our family’s crowded apartment in the Higashiyama district, I felt a similar centering energy as I smoothed out a blank new page and prepared my ink. The discipline of imitating ancient forms helped me become re-attuned to the world. Wordsworth writes in “Tintern Abbey” of “an eye made quiet by the power / Of harmony.” Looking closely at the beautiful brings its blessing.

Following the brush of an ancient Asian tradition, a modern westerner may be nourished by this example of generations who devoted themselves to imitating, and perpetuating, a world of beautiful forms. Such a discipline of attentiveness has special value today, when, in America and Japan alike, we need to recover a more caring and precise response to the natural world. It is closely allied to drawing from nature—all those sketches, diagrams, and details filling the journals of visionary naturalists like Hopkins and Muir and opening their language to the articulations of “the wild.” A genre of nature writing has flourished from journals like these, offering a corrective to the dreariness of much contemporary fiction and poetry, where characters are isolated equally from deep human relationships and from the liberating particularity of terrain.

The *kanji* for *ki*, or tree, includes four strokes. A vertical line expresses the tree’s thrust toward the sun, while outward diagonals, diverging half way down this line and fanning out to define, with it, a three-point base, suggest the graceful sweep of an evergreen. But across the top, where those lines start, is a horizontal line distinguishing the outline from what might otherwise appear a child’s version of a Christmas tree. I remembered this exposed line when hiking on Mt. Abraham near my house last week. It is one of the few mountains in Vermont that rises above tree line. As the spruces near the summit shrank in height before giving way to the granite ridge, I could observe how often they were bare of needles near the crown—trees rising above their own tree line. Dead branches, showing the effects of acid rain, continued to reach out for the sun, and to arrest passing hikers for a moment’s comprehension.

Paying attention to the trees may be the most important challenge for us in the industrialized world now, both as a way to understand the magnitude of danger posed

to the entire biosphere by our destructive behavior and to escape from the noisy distractions of our egotistical, self-assertive agendas. The haiku poet Basho writes, “Yield to the willow / All the loathing, all the desire / Of your heart.” We need now to identify and practice disciplines that will bring us back to earth, offering the relief of yielding to a larger world. This is the testimony of the brush, modestly following, stroke by stroke, the outlines of a world that blossoms from the ink.