

Naoya Shiga and Epicurus

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In his diary at the age of 29, Naoya Shiga wrote, 'I shall spend my life unearthing and mining my inner self.' Later, he came to accept that his works were termed 'novels of the inner self', and wrote, 'A writer has no other path but to gradually come to know life more deeply through the act of writing.' It could be said that his life was that of a Buddhist practitioner 'exploring human nature'.

Naoya was a man of action rather than an intellectual. This disposition was cultivated by his upbringing under his grandfather, Naomichi Shiga—a samurai of the Soma domain and a staunch practitioner who became a disciple of Ninomiya Sontoku who established a unique agricultural cooperative association (1822) and was promoted to become a samurai by Edo Shogunate—and by his learning from Kanzo Uchimura, a pastor of the Non-denominational church, whom Naoya visited every Sunday from the age of 17 to 24.

He invariably wrote by clearly imaging himself as a character at the very scene of the events in his works. In this respect, he shares a commonality with Tolstoy. Before being pre-empted by abstract concepts, he sought to express the scene through the active and simple native Japanese words that welled up from the depths of his being. These are what underpinned the reality of his works. His prose was described as being so revised that the printed words seemed to leap off the page and confront the reader. This is why he was hailed as the 'God of Novels'.

Did Naoya simply resign himself to devoting his life to Literary fiction? In his last work, 'A Drop of Water from the Nile', he wrote, 'I am like a drop of water in the leisurely flowing Nile', expressing the concept that 'form is no different from selflessness', '色即是空'^{siki soku ze kuu} and 'That drop is only me, neither before nor after... and will never be reborn, even after tens of thousands of years', expressing the concept that 'form is come from selflessness', '空即是色'^{kuu soku ze siki}. Was the realisation of selflessness the ultimate goal of his literature?

The Japan in which he lived was an era of tumultuous upheaval. His lifetime spanned from the era of the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, when the scent of the Edo period still lingered, to the age of atomic and hydrogen bombs. Upon witnessing the successful moon landing of Apollo 11, he lamented: 'Intelligence has reached the point of going to the moon, yet the wisdom of living is virtually zero.' Were he alive today, this lament would surely resurface. He would likely lament: 'Intelligence has reached the point where generative AI can write

novels and IPS cells can repair life, yet our wisdom for living is virtually zero' Did he pass away whilst still harbouring that lament, or did he leave behind some kind of clue?

In **The Flower of the Japanese Fatsia**, written when he was 74, he wrote: 'I was not born to write novels. The first priority is to live this single life—the only one chance we have, past or future—well' These words came after he had completed his auto-fiction **A Dark Night's Passing** and become a literary giant recognised by all. What, then, is this 'wisdom of living' of which he spoke?

Among the books Naoya read frequently from the age of 29 was Maeterlinck's **Wisdom and Destiny**. He stated that he was greatly influenced by this work. He also wrote that his reconciliation with his father, Naoharu Shiga, was due to this book. Maeterlinck emphasised the importance of the unconscious, which was rare in 19th century Europe; Schopenhauer is about the only other figure who can be cited in this regard. Although Freud's psychoanalysis emerged in around end of 19th century, in the intellect-centred West, the world of the unconscious is still regarded as a minor concern. It is thought that Maeterlinck was well-versed in Indian classics such as the Upanishads, as well as the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text of Hinduism. I suspect he also possessed a certain degree of knowledge regarding Mahayana Buddhism. If so, it would not be surprising if Maeterlinck had grasped the key tenets of Yogācāra (Yui-shiki: Yui means only, shiki means mind) Buddhism—which originated with the Buddha's discovery of the Ālaya-vijñāna (Alaya-shiki) in unconsciousness and was perfected by Vasubandhu in 5th century and by Dharumapala in 6th century India.

It is most curious that, despite living for thirteen years in Nara—the sacred site where Yui-shiki Buddhism was first introduced in Japan—Naoya made no mention whatsoever of Yui-shiki in his works, essays, notebooks or diaries. Why did Naoya, a novelist who explored the inner mind, not delve into Yui-shiki, which could be described Buddhist psychology, whilst maintaining close ties with two monks of Nara, Kaiun Kamitsukasa of Todaiji temple and Jyoshun Tagawa of Kofukuji temple?

One hypothesis is that he had grasped the essence of Yui-shiki through a careful reading of **Wisdom and Destiny** in which the statement 'the source of wisdom lies in the fresh heights of the unconscious' appears to allude to the Alaya-shiki and the Fundamental Wisdom into which it has been converted. Furthermore, the statement that 'living wisdom is not to be found within reason' clearly distinguishes between wisdom accompanied by action and the realm of reason which argues using concepts. Whilst these messages do not strictly use the terminology of Yui-shiki, they are messages that would not arise from the traditional Western thought centred

on reason. Might it be that Naoya, having read these messages of Maeterlinck closely, was able to recognise the essence of Yui-shiki through his exceptional imagination? At the very least, sufficiently so for his own self-inquiry.

In Yui-shiki, the existence of the two minds designated as the unconscious—namely, the Alaya-shiki, a pure and immaculate mind that stores all past experiences, and the Mana-shiki, which judges everything in terms of self-centred egoism—are of the utmost importance. We would like to group these two unconscious mind under the term of ‘spirituality’ in order to distinguish it from intellect. Yui-shiki Buddhism teaches that the eight minds—previous five sense minds of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch (sensibility), the sixth consciousness (intellect), the seventh Mana-shiki and the eighth Alaya-shiki (spirituality) —function simultaneously. For example, suppose a person is approaching from ahead. The sensibility recognises shape, colour and smell or so of the person. At the same time, the intellect receives information from the Alaya-shiki and thereby recognises that it is a person and who that person is. Simultaneously, the Mana-shiki judges the position that person occupies in relation to one’s own interests, conveys the orientation of that judgement to the intellect, and so one passes him by without acknowledging him, through the medium of sensibility.

In Yui-shiki Buddhism, it is taught that these eight minds are converted into eight wisdoms through the practice like ‘a dark night’s passing’ which reminiscent of John of the Cross’s *The Dark Night*. Alaya-shiki is converted into the fundamental wisdom which free you from the attachment to yourselves, Mana-shiki is converted into the wisdom through which everything could end up looking equal, intellect is converted into the wisdom through which you can appreciate the unhidden real figure of everything, and sensitivity is converted into the wisdom which is accompanied by positive action to deal appropriately with all issues and to serve your neighbours.

Naoya’s works contain numerous descriptions of dreams. During sleep, when the intellect is inactive, one dreams through the interplay of sensibility and spirituality. Naoya possessed a keen visual perception and a natural talent for memorising what he observed as visual images—a ‘camera eye’—which enabled him to remember his dreams vividly and later reproduce and describe them. The world of dreams is rooted in spirituality. The monk Myoe in 13th century Japan, author of *The Record of Dreams*, must have possessed a similar natural talent. I believe that a theory of action, karma, centred on spirituality and sensibility was a recurring motif in Naoya’s works.

Naoya also studied Anatole France's *The Garden of Epicurus* in depth. The Garden of Epicurus was a nature-rich academy built in the suburbs to escape the whirlwind of fame and power in Athens; it was a place where Epicurus welcomed all manner of people—including slaves and women—to live together and discuss philosophy. Although there is no explicit mention of Naoya taking a particular interest in the Garden of Epicurus itself, Naoya's admiration for Epicurus seems a natural progression. Both Saneatsu Mushanokouji's *New Village* in which the residents uphold the principles of mutual respect, self-sufficiency and creative activity and the Takabatake Salon—held at the former residence of Naoya in Takabatake Nara, which he himself designed and built, anticipating around fifty visitors a month—appear to have been inspired by the Garden of Epicurus. Naoya disliked the formation of a 'prescribed atmosphere' that might lead to a movement, so he even avoided calling it the Takabatake Salon himself; yet more than ten writers received advice from Naoya at the Takabatake Salon, and they came to be known as the Nara Group of novelists. Furthermore, many Western-style painters and others frequented the salon, receiving Shiga's criticism whilst enjoying lively exchanges amongst artists, including writers. The living expenses incurred by the Shiga family to sustain this salon were on a par with those of a Member of Parliament at the time. Epicurus's maxim 'Live in seclusion' was undoubtedly one of the factors that led Naoya to build an residence with a spacious communal area on land adjacent to the Kasuga Primeval Forest, befriending numerous literati and artists in an attempt to realise a healthy and lively life based on tranquillity and friendship. It is unclear whether he consciously intended it, but it is hard to believe that his passion of neighbourly love was limited merely to helping Saneatsu's New Village movement.

The phrase 'Know your primary mind as it is' ,^{nyojituchi jis in} '如実知自心', which Naoya often wrote calligraphy, was derived from a Chinese poem by Monk Ryōkan in 18th century Japan; the original source is the Mahāvairocana Sūtra of Mahayana Buddhism. It is written: 'Take bodhicitta as the cause, great compassion as the foundation, and expedient means as the ultimate goal. Bodhisattva was asked, 'What is bodhi?' He replied, 'It is to know your primary mind as it is.' To know one's primary mind as it is refers to fundamental wisdom—that is, to know one's true self, devoid of selfhood, once the barriers of intellect and excessive ego have been removed; yet its ultimate goal refers to expedient means—that is, the ability to respond to this phenomenal world. This resonates with the concept of 'Ataraxia' that Epicurus held as the purpose of life, and also aligns with the wisdom which is accompanied by positive action, which is taught as the most important wisdom by Yui-shiki Buddhism.

It is unclear whether Shiga's insights into life had reached that depth, but we may believe that, at the very least in terms of his actual deeds, he was operating at that level.

To draw an analogy with Yui-shiki Buddhism, the wisdom of living consists of observing all things with an unbiased mind and a mind capable of discerning their true nature, realising what is truly important, and acting in the best possible way without delay.

Yoshio Nakano stated that Naoya responded immediately to any question or problem posed from outside. This was likely a strength cultivated through his upbringing by his grandparents as a samurai. Furthermore, when consulted by disciples and others, he responded with complete candour and never hesitated to offer assistance. He loved his family and led a lively and bright daily life. It is only natural that when Muneyoshi Yanagi was asked 'who was the most religious member of the Shirakaba Group of artists', he immediately replied, 'It is Naoya Shiga', given that Yanagi wrote in **The Aspiration of Buddhist Aesthetics** that 'to be a free person is to be a religious person'. Likewise, the fact that Naoya's close friend Ton Satomi remarked, 'just thinking that Shiga is there makes my life a joy,' likely implies that Shiga was a Myokonin, a model of faith.

As Naoya Shiga himself stated that he was non-religious, his superficial faith that manifests itself in prayer appears to have been shallow. He was a Buddhist practitioner engaged in self-exploration, but he was not a Buddhist in the strict sense. All the ideals, aspirations, and visible fruits of our efforts or culture in this phenomenal world are, from the perspective of the Buddha's realm, just expedient means. If you remain there, it is nothing more than self-satisfaction. We may not think Naoya Shiga possessed the motif of transitioning from the realm of expedient means to the true Buddha-land. His statement that 'relying on Buddha's working is easy but lacks freedom' reflects the limitations of his spirituality.



Naoya Shiga(1883-1971)



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