

The Tale of Genji as a Moral Guidebook

by James Van Dyne

To call the “Tale of Genji” a moral guidebook seems illogical, especially when many of the characters, by modern standards, seem to lack any morals. However, if we follow the life of Genji and his treatment of women, we notice a Buddhist moral guide appear as Genji matures. As he follows Buddhist tenets throughout his life he rises in rank and esteem.

The problems began for Genji with his mother's death. Because he wasn't old enough to comprehend her death, she remains a mystery to him. This creates an oedipus complex of sorts within him that stays until late in life. He lusts after Fujitsubo because he hears she looks similar to his mother. Because he cannot have Fujitsubo, he raises Murasaki because of her resemblance to Fujitsubo. Upon first seeing Murasaki Genji began to long for “the pleasure of having her with him day and night, to make up for the absence of the lady he loved.”(T 87) This complex causes much suffering for Genji and all of those involved, most noticeably by Genji’s fear of living without Murasaki.

Genji without a doubt neglects Aoi, his first wife. The neglect was largely caused by promiscuous behavior that Genji had in his youth. The sudden devotion of Genji to Aoi around the time of Yūgiri’s birth was a sudden correction of this sin. Tō no Chūjō, Aoi’s brother and Genji’s best friend, was confused by the sudden act of devotion as he had never seen it before. (T 181) However try as he might, the sudden correction of his ways was ultimately not enough to save Aoi from The Rokujō Haven’s spirit. Her spirit kills Aoi because of this bitter jealousy of her own relationship with Genji. (T 172)

Any relations beyond friendship that Genji develops with Murasaki are also inherently void of Buddhist tenets because of their origin in longing and the sexual desire that comes from it. This sin compounded while Aoi is still alive. This relationship though, as seemingly shallow of Genji, is vital to him. Murasaki becomes that mother figure that he so longs for and gives him someone to understand and support him in his times of need.

While their relationship does start in contrast with Buddhist beliefs and tenets, after they are married the relationship becomes morally legitimate.

Perhaps the worst instance of Buddhist moral violation was Genji's relationship with Fujitsubo not only because relationship defied the Eightfold Path's "Right Action" tenet but also because the results of the relationship caused many other violations. Fujitsubo lived the rest of her life in constant fear that "any breath of it [the relationship between Genji and Fujitsubo and its result - Reizei] might reach His Majesty..." (T 358) Upon her death the heavens proclaimed Reizei's offense of honoring a man who wasn't his father and was issuing many disastrous warnings (T 356)

Throughout Genji's life most of his faults against Buddhism are because of, or the result of sexual encounters. His actions in his youth lead to two deaths by the Rokujō Haven's spirit (Yūgao and Aoi) and nearly killed Murasaki when he is older. While he doesn't directly lie to his father about Reizei he isn't honest. With Genji's behavior in his youth seemingly being solely about the flesh, how could he ever be exalted as a Guidebook Example for Buddhist life.

There is certainly no arguing that Genji's entire life is buddhism in it's best form, for a lot of his life it is quite the opposite. While in Suma during purification he says, "Myriads of gods must feel pity in their hearts when they look on me: there is nothing I have done anyone could call a crime" in complete ignorance of his offenses. (T 253)

However, outside of his promiscuous relationships in youth, his character as a whole is very much in line with the ideals of Buddhism. He is very well learned and encourages his son Yūgiri in his studies. Upon his return from exile in Suma Genji is not spiteful. When hearing that Kashiwagi has had a child with his wife he does not get too upset, and reflects upon his own behavior. The fact that Genji did *not* get upset with Kashiwagi and still treated him as usual tormented Kashiwagi until his own death.

As Genji ages and rises in rank he matures considerably. With his age he begins to question when he himself will make the final steps and leave the city to become a monk. However because Genji is so afraid of losing Murasaki, like he did his own mother and Fujitsubo, he is be unable to go to the mountains before her death. Thus Genji is prepared slowly overtime so that once his last attachment to the world is gone he can go to the mountains.

Genji's life represents not only a being who breaks most all of the tenets of Buddhism and his character represents it. He was a confused person who had no inkling of his own offenses. Until his return from Suma Genji lived a life that mostly contradicted Buddhism. However as he ages he refrains from most of the illicit behavior of his youth. He admits what he did in his youth was indeed quite heinous. (T 661) However, as he becomes aware of his faults he tries to correct them. As Genji corrects the errors in his ways and lives his life more in line with the Buddhist ideals, he rises in rank, power, and esteem. It is only once his last indulgence from his youth is gone that he can become a monk and take his life to the highest level of Buddhist devotion.

Reflecting upon the entirety of Genji's life and comparing the amount of devotion to Buddhist Morals with the stability of his life, the pattern is clear. If we compare his son Yūgiri the opposite is true. Yūgiri lived a straight and stable life until middle age. At middle age Yūgiri strays from the Eightfold Path and his life falls apart. His wife effectively leaves him, his love interest wants nothing to do with him, and he is the laughing stock of the city. Genji's life proves that it is never too late to change ones ways and reap the benefit. It is in this perspective that Genji's life is indeed a Buddhist Moral Guidebook.

Works Cited

Shikibu, Murasaki, and Royall Tyler. The Tale of Genji. New York: Penguin Books, 2001.