



AWESOME NIGHTFALL

THE LIFE, TIMES, AND
POETRY OF SAIGYŌ

WILLIAM R. LAFLEUR

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Praise for *Awesome Nightfall*

“This remarkable life and poetry of Saigyō is essential reading: essential to understanding Japanese literary tradition, and essential to understanding the role of Japan’s most influential poet in the history of its Buddhism. Saigyō found beauty in the temporality of things and identified with ordinary villagers throughout his famous journeys, writing poems that remain as elegant, perceptive, and moving today as they were a thousand years ago. William R. LaFleur presents a striking portrait of the man and his work. His scholarship and artistry are commendable. *Awesome Nightfall* is a classic.”—Sam Hamill, author of *Dumb Luck*

“Extraordinary. This fascinating work is equal parts biography, history, poetry, and even mystery as it traces the life and mind of an elusive and complex figure of Japanese culture. This book is one of the rare works that leaves the reader overflowing with satisfaction in knowing something important and wonderful was achieved in the trip through its pages.”—*New York Resident*

“In 1140, Saigyō cast off his warrior past and entered his poetic and priestly vocation. Attached to no monastery, he roamed Japan, engaging in religious austerities and honing his skills. William R. LaFleur’s *Awesome Nightfall* offers us a more complex, more human Saigyō—reclusive, yes, but still a very close observer of his times, viewing the enveloping darkness from the heights ‘where none can view me / but I can review all things.’”—*The Asahi Shimbun*

“A beautifully proportioned work of lucid scholarship and superb literary translation. This fruit of LaFleur’s long and inspired labor not only honors the great Buddhist poet Saigyō, but the intelligence and heart of readers as well.”—Mike O’Connor, translator of *The Clouds Should Know Me By Now* and *Where the World Does Not Follow*

“Bill LaFleur’s translations of Saigyō’s poetry have opened up a window on twelfth-century Japan, providing us with firsthand glimpses of the Buddhist religion, the valuation of nature, and the specific spirit of the times.”—*Mircea Eliade*

“Saigyō lived in twelfth-century Japan, but from reading his poetry, it doesn’t feel like it. The first half of *Awesome Nightfall* is an account of his life in the turbulent Japanese culture amid which he was raised. Dotted with his poems, it provides a good ground from which to read the second half, which consists of about 150 *waka* (traditional five-line poems). His poems are alive to the vivid transformations of inner and outer worlds. This is an inspiring volume, poetically and spiritually.”—*Dharma Life*

“A quarter of a century ago, LaFleur published his book on Saigyō, *Mirror for the Moon*, which *Awesome Nightfall* thoughtfully and masterfully supersedes. LaFleur sketches Saigyō’s life in bold strokes and introduces new findings for the English-reading audience. The book opens up fascinating and important questions, and as such this volume will be an interesting choice for seminars on Japanese medieval literature, history, or religion.”—*Philosophy East & West*



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OF SAIGYŌ

William R. LaFleur



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This is the book I promised
to Mariko and Kiyomi,
who now have it along with my thanks to them.



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Preface

“FREE AND EASY WANDERING” designates an appealing way of life according to *Chuang tzu*, but it is, in fact, a path that few have entered either freely or easily. Saigyō’s life was too difficult to be so designated, even though it included several extended journeys. After he died, his contemporaries praised him for having shown that the life of a Buddhist monk can be fully compatible with a dedication to writing poetry. Proving this, however, involved a lifelong, often painful, struggle. The real Saigyō was not quite as reclusive as later portraits made him out to be. He lived in horrific times and could not easily tear his attention away from what was going on. And he obviously struggled with internal demons—related to sex, to worries about the karmic imprint of his warrior past, to anxiety about loss of social visibility through taking the tonsure, and to certain items he successfully kept concealed from all later generations.

Pithy phrases that fused the “way of poetry” with “the Way of Buddha” were common in twelfth-century Japan and had a certain caché. But Saigyō realized that to test their validity required putting the whole of a life into the experiment—and with an outcome far from certain. And he knew it had to be a life intentionally disconnected from the lives of contemporaries, friends, even lovers—that is, persons who, even though themselves poets, were not engaged in precisely *this* experiment.

Thirty years ago, when I was just beginning to study this poet, there was a perceptible dry spell within Japanese scholarship on Saigyō. The idealized

image of this poet had cracked, but there was little yet to take its place. The principal students of Japanese literature in North America were cold-shouldering him. My mentor at the University of Chicago, the late Joseph M. Kitagawa, however, maintained that study of this twelfth-century monk could be as fine an aperture into medieval Japanese Buddhism as one might find. And then Masao Abe, a philosopher of Zen, graciously introduced me to the late Professor Kitayama Masamichi, a student of Western literature who also had a profound grasp of medieval Japanese poetry. Reading and analyzing poem after poem together with Kiyatama, he genially badgered me. He was critical of what he had read in translation. “People both in Japan and in the West want a sweetened Saigyō,” he claimed and then went on to point out that Saigyō had a difficult life, lived through tempestuous times, and fought hard to find the exact nexus between Buddhism and poetry. More importantly, he insisted, even today’s Japanese readers, modern in their tastes, easily forget that Saigyō lived in a medieval episteme in which the claims of Buddhism were not to be taken lightly. If, in fact, the way of poetry were ultimately *not* compatible with his vows as a monk, Saigyō assumed that he had thrown more than this one, present life into jeopardy. He took the risks as real.

In 1978 I published *Mirror for the Moon: A Selection of Poems by Saigyō (1118–1190)*, and, although well received, it strikes me now as a somewhat “sweeter” Saigyō than the one I have come to know and will try to represent here in *Awesome Nightfall*. A large factor in this difference is that the present book relates the poems to a fairly extensive account of the poet’s life. This is in part because Japanese scholarship on Saigyō has in recent decades not only provided much more detail about that life, but has, almost without exception, insisted that it is impossible to understand the specificity and beauty of Saigyō’s verse unless his commitment to the Buddhist path, often explicit but always implicit, is taken seriously. Now fortunately translated into English, the third volume of a history of Japanese literature by Jin’ichi Konishi, probably the twentieth century’s master scholar of that literature, makes this point about Saigyō abundantly clear. Readers of the present book may wish to compare my translations with the usually much more crisp and lean renderings of Saigyō by Burton Watson in his *Poems of a Mountain Home*.

Hoping to give the general reader unencumbered access to this portion of the Saigyō trove, I have put references and discussions of interest to special-

ists into pages at the book's end, citing the page number and calling out the relevant passage. Because it incorporates poems by Saigyō found in the *Kikigaki-shū* and other sources and, moreover, does so in a conveniently numbered fashion, the Nihon koten zensho edition of the *Sanka-shū* edited by Itō Yoshio has been the edition I have followed. The number provided after the romanized version of each poem is in accord with that sequence. When a second number appears in brackets that is because the same poem or a variant form of it was selected for inclusion in an imperial collection, the *Shinkokin-shū*. The *Saigyō zen-shū* edited by Kubota Jun is a twelve-hundred-page treasury of variant Saigyō texts, prose items that he possibly authored, and works such as Noh plays built on his poetry that show how later ages honored him. Kubota's work is a model we too should strive to someday imitate in this domain. Exactly why I have given this book the title I have will, I hope, become clear to the reader who goes with it all the way.

Poems here that originally appeared in *Mirror for the Moon* were greatly benefited by discussions of them with Gary Snyder. Thanks to an invitation from Koyama Hiroshi, I was able to spend a very profitable half year in 1990 at the Kokubungaku Shiryōkan in Tokyo, updating my own studies of Saigyō through contact with the preeminent scholars of this topic. Their work benefited me immensely. My debt to Matsuno Yōichi and Komine Kazuaki is especially large. Fruitful discussions of religion and literature in Japan with Richard Gardner have been a constant over the years. Students and colleagues both at UCLA and the University of Pennsylvania have added much to the making of this book. I am grateful to David Kittelstrom for his enthusiasm for this project and his exemplary editing. Kayama Matazo and the National Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo graciously permitted use of his superb painting for the cover. And to Mariko and Kiyomi, who at times may have thought I too must have left the householder's life (or at least its duties) in order to work on Saigyō, I express my deepest thanks of all.

*Selected Places of
Importance in
Saigyō's Life*

1. Heian (today's Kyoto)
2. Mount Yoshino
3. Mount Kōya
4. Ise
5. Sanuki Province (in Shikoku)
6. Bizen Province
7. Shirakawa Barrier
8. Mount Ōmine
9. Ōwada (today's Kobe)
10. Nara
11. Saya-no-nakayama
12. Eguchi (in today's Osaka)
13. Mount Fuji
14. Kamakura
15. Hiraizumi



The Life and Times of Saigyō

TRULY FINE POETRY sits uncomfortably under any label. Yet, as long as qualifiers do not overwhelm what is universal in the poetry to which they have been attached, they can have value. To forbid any reference to Dante or Milton as “Christian poets” would be to deny something of central importance in the sensibilities and writing of both men. And in a similar fashion we may refer to Saigyō as Japan’s foremost “Buddhist” poet—and do so without short-changing what is universal in his verse.

What is best in his poetry, however, avoids the pious platitude. Much of the time Saigyō, originally a samurai, grappled with the implications of having become a monk. And, because he lived in “interesting” times, he struggled to understand and articulate the connection between his religious tradition and the social chaos he witnessed firsthand. Rightly known to many Japanese today as an unusually perceptive celebrant of nature’s beauty, Saigyō’s sensitivity toward human conflict was equally deep. War was much on his mind. And he wrote about it more than any other poet of his era.

Bashō, Japan’s best-known poet, explicitly named Saigyō, who lived four centuries earlier, as the poet of the past to whom he was most indebted. And that debt is implicit in his writings, both prose and poetry. Yet there are real differences. There is something detectably modern in Bashō, whereas Saigyō’s view of reality is clearly medieval. Perhaps because he was not as proximate a witness of man’s inhumanity to man, Bashō would not have written about Buddhist hells in the way that Saigyō did. And, whereas Saigyō shows an existential anxiety about ways in which his multiple passions were locked in a struggle with his vows as a monk, Bashō traveled dressed in borrowed clerical

robes, wore them lightly, and jested about being the equivalent of a bat, not clearly one thing or another.

I agree with those Japanese scholars of this subject who insist that any adequate grasp of Saigyō and his work requires attention to his life and his personal interaction with events of his time. And it appears that Saigyō himself wanted his poetry to be seen in this way. That is why, to a degree not seen in any other poet of his time, he prefaced many of his verses with prose introductions that located his writing in time, space, and occasion. This is not to deny that he, like others, could assume a fictive posture at times. It is merely to underscore something noted by Brower and Miner more than forty years ago—namely, that Saigyō allowed less “aesthetic distance” between himself and the persona of his verse than did his contemporaries.

In the year 1140, in an unnamed temple in or near Heian, the older name for today’s Kyoto, Saigyō became a tonsured monk. He was twenty-three years old. And it was a move that surprised, even startled, his contemporaries. From that point on, consorting with other monks proved an important, although far from exclusive, part of his life. Razoring the head to a bald pate, at least in this man’s case, literally embodied a decision to cease being a warrior and to enter into the path of the Buddhist life. It shaped almost everything he did and wrote for the remaining half century of his lifespan. A struggle within himself to relate *events*—large social ones as well as the more private ones of his own life—to the question of what it might mean to be a Buddhist was central to him. That struggle, consequently, is part of many of the more than two thousand poems of his we have.

The majority of these verses cannot be dated with any accuracy. But, as just noted, he affixed informative prose headnotes to many. Equally interesting, however, were those episodes in his own life about which he registers personal pain but leaves in tantalizing obscurity. And since these events clearly figured into his own struggle to understand what it might mean for him to follow the vocation of a Buddhist monk, in this book I employ and follow those Japanese scholars who have used a variety of resources to try to figure out what facts may have lain behind those portions of Saigyō’s life he seems to have wanted to leave concealed.

The nature of his death, discussed at its appropriate place in the chronology here, left such an impression on his contemporaries that soon afterward hagiographic accounts of his life and death appeared. These were pious

romanticizations that filled in the informational lacunae with invented materials assimilating his life story to that of Shakyamuni Buddha. This meant that throughout the medieval period and until the twentieth century, the general image of this poet-monk was that of a supremely enlightened person. Needless to say, modern scholarship has shown that reality was far more complex—and also much more interesting. What we now tend to find importantly “Buddhist” in his life and verse has more to do with his finely sharpened sense of the world’s *samsara* than with any clear sense of him as having lived long in some state of continuous *nirvana*.

One felicitous byproduct of the collapse of the romanticized version has been a renewed appreciation of his poetry. The poems, with very rare exceptions, are all in the form referred to by Japanese as *waka*, the most basic form of their tradition and slightly longer than what came into being later, namely, the *haiku*. The *waka* usually had thirty-one syllables in a 5-7-5-7-7 sequence, although Saigyō, more often than other poets, stretched this “rule” by throwing in an extra syllable from time to time. Of course, the lavish employment of homonyms in traditional Japanese poetry meant that whole phrases and sometimes whole poems could have more than one reading or signification. *Engo*, or words with meanings associated with words found elsewhere in a given *waka*, allow for more significations and fullness than may first appear. It may be said that in this verse form—as in other aspects of their cultural life—the people of Japan have shown an extraordinary skill in careful packaging. The *waka* too is best opened with care, close attention, and appreciation for the skill of the person who put so much into so small a container.



To provide details of what is known about Saigyō’s origins and early life involves noticing that early on—that is, until he became a monk and took on names with Buddhist significations, eventuating in “Saigyō”—his still-secular name identified him as being from the Satō branch of the vast Fujiwara clan. His personalized tag was Norikiyo. Of great significance for understanding both the biography and the verse of Saigyō is the fact that the Satō was a military house, one claiming descent from Fujiwara Hidesato. Hidesato was a warrior who in 940 had been instrumental in suppressing a revolt against imperial authority in northeastern Japan, had himself probably

killed the leader of that uprising, and was subsequently celebrated for his courage and skills. Memory of him remained strong. Two hundred years or nine generations later, Norikiyo clearly grew up in a family that made much of its own long service to the imperial house. His paternal great-grandfather had probably been the one who moved the family more-or-less permanently to the capital of Heian, although the family's roots and many of its continuing connections were in the northeastern area of Japan's principal island.

In a poem written near the end of his life, Saigyō appears to bring forward memory of his—that is, Norikiyo's—childhood and an early fascination with aspects of the warrior's life.

*shino tamete
suzume yumi haru
o no warawa
hitai eboshi no
hoshige naru kana*

1812

Toy bamboo bow
in hand, a mere child takes
aim at a sparrow
and already longs to wear
a warrior's headgear.

Kubota Jun, the leading Saigyō scholar today, sees the poet here recognizing how, early in his life, he wanted not only to follow the family tradition by becoming a samurai, but wished to gain a high level of skill in the use of the bow and arrow. His specific dream, later realized, had been to take part in the contests known as *yabusame*, in which archers mounted on horses shoot arrows at a sequence of targets while galloping at breakneck speeds. Public exhibitions of such skills were held in Saigyō's time within the precincts of Shinto shrines. The level of equestrian skill required was very high, and, importantly, he wrote precisely about his horsemanship in what is probably his earliest extant poem.

*fushimi suginu
oka-no-ya ni nao*

todomaraji
hino made yukite
koma kokoromin

1529

Taking off from Fushimi,
galloping nonstop over
Oka-no-ya's hills,
I spur him on to Hino to test
what this young horse can do!

Norikiyo's physical prowess extended also to the court sport of the times, *kemari*. This game, probably an import from China, had been popular among the Japanese nobility since the seventh century and involved trying to kick a deerskin ball so that it would remain aloft as long as possible. Fujiwara Yorisuke, who wrote up a record of this sport, noted at the time that Norikiyo "was highly regarded for his exceptional ability in *kemari*."

Although Saigyō's family was later referred to as a "family of wealth," its *social* position in the capital was not equal to that of the court nobility. Rather, once they had moved to the capital, the Satō people, hereditary warriors, functioned as guards for royal persons and had official commissions as such. Norikiyo's father, Yasukiyo, was temporarily relieved of his commission, perhaps because of some minor infraction of the rules or decorum. His name drops out of all records by the time Norikiyo is only three years old, and it seems quite likely that he died at a relatively young age.

This did not effect Norikiyo's career for long. Although a request for advancement made at age fifteen was not accepted, by eighteen he had become a captain of the imperial guard. Most important for his career was the close link he forged with members of the Tokudaiji family, a different sub-branch of the Fujiwara, but, unlike the Satō, one much closer to the imperial family. Some key members of the Tokudaiji served among the highest ministers of state. Norikiyo during his teen years became a retainer of Tokudaiji Saneyoshi (1095–1157). Very important for multiple reasons—and many that impacted upon Saigyō's career and poetry—was the fact that Saneyoshi's younger sister Shōshi (1101–45), celebrated for her extraordinary

beauty, became the principal empress consort to Emperor Toba (1103–56, r. 1107–23) and the mother of two later emperors, Sutoku and Go-Shirakawa.

Saneyoshi's close connections to the throne meant that his retainer, the young Norikiyo, also gained access—such access as could be given to a warrior whose status did not equal that of Saneyoshi and his family. Norikiyo at some point became a member of an elite corps of court-based samurai, the North-Facing Warriors, a band of men officially charged with the defense of persons who, having been emperors in their youth, had “retired” while still young and then remained in “retirement” palaces for many decades. Through his connections Norikiyo got to serve in the retirement palace not only of Toba but also, later, in that of his successor, Sutoku (1119–64).

We get a unique glimpse of Norikiyo's life during this period through a poem in which he records his elation at being invited by a contemporary to write a poem on an official occasion. Norikiyo, as became his practice later when he became Saigyō, provided an informative prose introduction.

While Fujiwara Munesuke was Middle Counselor, he presented a large number of chrysanthemums as a gift to Retired Emperor Toba. When planted, they filled the area of the eastern garden of Toba's southern palace. Kinshige, a captain of the imperial guard, invited a number of people to write verses celebrating these chrysanthemums, and I was pleased to be included among those asked:

*kimi ga sumu
yado no tsubo o ba
kiku zo kazaru
hijiri no miya to
iubekaruran*

510

Chrysanthemums fill
the garden where the days are passed
by Your Majesty—
so “Grotto of the Holy Sage,”
the palace name, fits very well.

There is nothing spectacular about the poem. It is formal and written on an occasion when formality was expected. He records his pleasure at being invited to provide a poem in spite of not being the social equal of the others. And since it is someone named “Kinshige” who is smoothing the way for Norikiyo to submit a poem among this elite group, it is worth nothing that Kinshige was a nephew of Saneyoshi and also someone in the Tokudaiji household. We can surmise that within the Tokudaiji household Norikiyo had been honing his own poetic skills, and that these had been gaining respect and praise—so much so that he was pushed forward to write something for the fete to honor Emperor’s Toba’s “retirement.”



There is an important reason why I have placed scare quotes around the term “retirement.” It refers not so much to an emperor’s relinquishment of power but, paradoxically, to his *gaining enhanced power*. The mechanism for achieving this was an institution, largely of the twelfth century, called *insei*, or “governing while retired.” Its creation made this period of time unusual in Japan’s history. For more than two centuries prior to the *insei* invention, the emperors of Japan had had next to no power. This was because all decisions of significance were then being made by the senior males of the northern branch of the Fujiwara family. During the heyday of Fujiwara dominance emperors were most often enthroned at a tender age—some as young as six, many in their early teens—and abdicated often within a decade or so. These relatively young and still vulnerable persons, having Fujiwara mothers and married usually to Fujiwara women while young, were under intense and irresistible pressure to rubber-stamp decisions already made by the senior Fujiwara males. This leverage exerted on them very often included the demand that they abdicate early and live out the rest of their lives in comfortable but politically impotent retirement.

This changed during the eleventh century when Emperor Go-Sanjō (r. 1068–73) and especially his son, Emperor Shirakawa (r. 1073–87), took advantage of their relatively looser entrapment in the Fujiwara mode to turn their own retirement years into ones of *real* power. Shirakawa, whose post-abdication life went on for forty-two years, was a strong-willed man with a wide gambit of operations. He provided the prototype that others strove to

emulate during the twelfth century. The locus of operations of these two and all later *insei* figures was a kind of private cloister, although such places were anything but quiet or remote. Even when such “retiring” emperors took the tonsure and became in some sense royal Buddhist monks, their involvement in directing the political and social order of the so-called “secular” world was extensive. Their cloisters were, even if not the palace per se, the loci of actual power. Administrative offices were staffed and maintained there, and they were often sites of large social and artistic events. The previously cited poem of Norikiyo follows the public lie, namely that Emperor Toba in retirement was living in a building named as if it were the obscure hideaway of a Taoist recluse. The gap between the name and reality, however, was considerable. Toba’s “grotto” was furnished for living on a lavish scale. And if the word “palace” designates the real locus of royal power, then these cloisters were the period’s true palaces. Conversely the “palace,” where lived a very young and soon-to-be retired emperor, was, at least as a place of power, no palace at all.

In the translations below we will see our poet, both in his Norikiyo phase and then later as Saigyō, moved to write about paradoxes, about gaps between reality and appearance, and about attitudes and actions that ordinary society cannot comprehend because of its own attachment to illusions. This may have arisen in part from his recognition that at society’s very top—that is, in the imperial sphere—things were a hall of mirrors. Men within it could grab increased power for themselves only by acts that, on their surface, purported to be the relinquishment of power. And by serving as a guard in the “palace” of Toba and then later in that of Sutoku, Norikiyo got to see firsthand not only the activities but the contradictions in how things were articulated, structured, and run at the social and political apex of his society. It was a component of what impelled him to investigate and practice Buddhism.



Recent studies have uncovered details concerning what Norikiyo likely witnessed and experienced. They flesh out what it would have meant for him to detect contradictions in the courtly society of his era. Specifically, data have been compiled showing that the band of North-Facing Warriors, the elite band of warriors he joined, was composed of young men whose physical

beauty was a requirement for their selection. This corps, brought into being by Shirakawa and employed continuously by the *insei* emperors, was responsible for providing these royal persons not only with safety but also with pleasure. Scholars have uncovered references both to “special tasks” required of these warriors and to descriptions of some individuals among them as having been the “paramours” of their royal patrons.

“Within the hidden side of the culture of the court during the *insei* period males having sex with other males was very much in vogue,” wrote the late Mezaki Tokue, a historian who, more than any other, coordinated the poetry of Saigyō with data from diaries and historical records of that period. These records name individuals who were erotically involved with the retired emperors, Toba and Go-Shirakawa (1127–92) most especially. Gomi Fumihiko, perhaps the most important historian of this period, traces connections between individuals involved in these homoerotic activities, jealousies and conflicts that arose among them, and the society-shaking eruptions of violence in the capital in 1156 and 1159. He insists that these relationships had a strong but hitherto unrecognized impact upon the political and social history of the era.

Toba was the first of two retired emperors served by Norikiyo, and it is the name of Toba that shows up most frequently among the *insei* figures involved with male paramours. Among those mentioned was one of the younger men of the Tokudaiji family, Kin’yoshi, who was the same age as Norikiyo and a close associate of his. Since the sources of the time reveal these details with the implication that those involved had been making efforts to keep them hidden, we see that homosexual sex was considered irregular and out of step with the heterosexual norm of that era. This meant also that what was going on in the palaces of the *insei* emperors, however much “in vogue” privately, was not publicly condoned.

Japan in this period was hardly puritan. Multiple affairs, as celebrated through the philandering hero of the eleventh-century *Tale of Genji* and as described as the de facto situation of her own life by Sei Shonagon in her *Pillow Book*, were condoned among those who could afford them. “Night-crawling” by men to the apartments of women was *de rigueur*. Mezaki writes:

Erotic love between males and females had from earlier times provided the most popular source for the writing of *waka* poetry. Among

the courtiers eros and its pursuit were not brought under moral censure. On the contrary, [constantly changing liaisons] were thought to illustrate the [quasi Buddhist] notion of *mono no aware*. Even among monks engaged in the arts, to celebrate such love in verse was thought to pose no problem whatsoever to spiritual aspirations. And the expression of this freely in verse is something we find in a very large number of Saigyō's poems.

By contrast, the love of one male for another male involved consorting in secret and away from the public eye. Such sex had no cultural value and was socially sterile.

Mezaki asks, should we not surmise that at least one of the things prompting Norikiyo to consider becoming a monk was a sense of finding the expectations placed on him as a member of the North-Facing Warrior group distasteful, even a source of personal suffering?

The following poem, written likely just before Norikiyo became a monk, oscillates interestingly between the future and the past. It displays, however obliquely, an insight by Norikiyo into what was happening, and his interest appears to have been in communicating something of his own situation within Toba's *insei* palace.

*iza saraba
sakari omou mo
hodo mo araji
hakoya ga mine no
hana ni mutsureshi*

1594

When facing crises,
what will be gone completely are
thoughts of their perfect beauty—
that of blossoms known intimately
in the sage emperor's palace.

The term *hakoya*, derived from the *Chuang tzu*, was a term for a hermit sage's refuge in mountains. In Norikiyo's day it had rather recently come to refer to the palace of the retired emperor. Kubota notes that the hasty reader may

think the phrase “will be gone completely” characterizes “blossoms,” thus indicating their well-known ephemerality, expressed in much hackneyed verse. The grammar insists, however, that what “will be gone completely” at some future date will be the thought or memories of those blossoms. That is, Norikiyo appears, while in the midst of the court, to project himself into a future in which he no longer holds the memory of the spectacular flowers of the *insei* palace (and, by extension, all the other blandishments of life there). And the “crisis” mentioned in the first line, although also referred to as an aspect of the future, may be Norikiyo’s hint that he was facing such in his own relations at the imperial court.

The prose headnote to a much-admired poem of this period made an explicit connection to his thought about leaving palace life. This question, he writes, haunted him even while engaged in what should have been a totally pleasurable activity.

During the time when I was coming to a decision about leaving secular life, I was on the Eastern Hills with a number of people, and we were writing verses expressing our sentiments about the gathering mists there. I wrote:

sora ni naru
kokoro wa haru no
kasumi nite
yo ni araji tomo
omoitatsu kana

786

A man whose mind is
one with the sky-void steps
into a spring mist
and thinks to himself he might
in fact step out of the world.

He plays here with the double entendre of one word, *sora*—which refers to the sky but connotes as well the Buddhist emptiness—and another, *yo*—which here denotes the sense of being so enclosed by mists that the physical *world* disappears before one’s eyes but with the secondary sense of a leaving

of the *world* of secular life. It is a rich, skillfully executed poem. And it describes Norikiyo's state of mind.

During the tenth lunar month of 1140, the twenty-three-year-old Norikiyo left the palace and became a monk. The dharma-name given him then was En'i (Level of Perfection), and some documents thereafter refer to him by this name. Although it appeared at a later point in his monastic life, the name Saigyō, meaning "Going West," came to be the popularly accepted appellation for this person, and it remains so today.

He addressed a leave-taking poem to Retired Emperor Toba, himself thirty-seven years old at the time. It is a poem relishing irony. It was probably his last poem written while still Norikiyo.

Written when I was petitioning the *insei* Emperor Toba to grant me his permission to leave secular life:

oshimu tote
oshimarenubeki
kono yo kawa
mi o sutete koso
mi o mo tasukeme

2083

So loath to lose
what maybe should be loathed:
one's place in the world;
we maybe rescue best the self
by simply throwing it away.

Both careful thought and linguistic skill show themselves here. Norikiyo, I suggest, cleverly mirrors the manner in which the *insei* emperors themselves had gained *by giving something away*. As noted above, they grabbed real power by giving up what most people in society, under illusion on this score, probably considered society's preeminent position. They made personal capital out of their insider knowledge that reality is not what society, or "the world," thinks it to be.

Norikiyo knew that his secular master, Toba, understood how things worked at that level. But he twisted the notion of the ironic outcome in a different but at the same time more traditional direction. His employment of it was not new in that Buddhists had always held that jettisoning the world, its pleasures, and its blandishments enables one to have access to the far-preferable spiritual benefits that accrue to practice along the Buddhist path.

I think it appropriate to see a subtly phrased admonition in the poem—even though it was meant to function first as a formal request for permission. There is a clear implication that “the world” he no longer prizes includes the ambience of Toba’s palace. Does he, as some critics have suggested, imply that the palace itself is a *decadent* world? His poem implies, even if it does not directly state, that relinquishing the throne as a mere tactical move to gain more political power subverted what *Buddhists* meant by retiring from the world.

Even though I suggested above that a desire to get out of what might have been a highly charged, personally painful, or even disgraceful predicament of tabooed sex in Toba’s palace could have stimulated Norikiyo’s decision to leave, it is important to recognize that until recently scholars in Japan focused upon a different reason. This explanation too has the ring of plausibility. It hones in on the possibility that Norikiyo had become romantically involved with a court lady whose social position was far higher than his own and that, once this liaison had been discovered, he had no option but to leave the palace. Doing so through *shukke*—literally, leaving life as a (secular) householder—was for him the most convenient option.

If such a court lady had, in fact, been part of the picture, many students of this topic consider Taikenmon-in (1101–45) to have quite likely been the person with whom Norikiyo had gotten involved. The evidence for this theory is circumstantial and has primarily three components. The first is that Taikenmon-in, referred to above as Shōshi, was the younger sister of Tokudaiji Saneyoshi. That is, she was part of the family whose male members were very close to Norikiyo, their retainer. Thus, it is assumed, the two of them would have had occasions to meet within that context in spite of the fact that he was much younger than she. Norikiyo, as noted, was born in 1118. That same year Taikenmon-in, seventeen years old and already a famous beauty, was selected by retired emperor Shirakawa to be the empress consort for his grandson, Toba, who was sixteen at that time and on the throne.

Second, her reputation for beauty was matched by one for granting sexual

favors quite liberally, even well after she had become empress. Below we will note how this aspect of her life may have precipitated an armed conflict. Here we can simply note that her readiness for multiple affairs has led some to conclude that Norikiyo may have been one of her many lovers—but to his own dismay when their status differential became known. The third piece of evidence for their affair lies in the fact that Saigyō, long after becoming a monk, carried on extensive correspondence and poetry exchanges with her ladies-in-waiting, some of whom themselves were of high court rank.

Clearly these attempts to put together a puzzle are missing far too many of the most important pieces. The documentary evidence for the existence of a homoerotic culture in Toba's palace is fairly strong. But, even if this had been a factor in Norikiyo's decision, we have no way of knowing whether he found it unpalatable in principle or whether he was jilted or offended in the context of sexual activities in which he was engaged. And, since it seems clear that many of the men having sex with other men in the palace were also erotically involved with women, personal distress over some aspect of the homosexual activity does not itself rule out the possibility that Norikiyo had also fallen into an impossible situation with a lady of the court. We simply do not know.

And, it appears, we were not meant to know. Norikiyo, just as Saigyō later, wrote very informative, even detailed, prose headnotes to poems when he thought the reader deserved to know certain things. At other times, sometimes when our curiosity is most keen, he provided nothing in detail. The evidence at the edges tantalizes. That someone, of undisclosed gender, had been a part of his decision is strongly suggested in the following:

nanigoto ni
tsukete ka yo o ba
itowamashi
ukarishi hito zo
kyō wa ureshiki

1440

What turned me to wanting
to break with the world-bound life?
Maybe the one whose love

turned to loathing and who now
joins me in a different joy.

It is likely that, unless he were merely trying to hide facts out of shame, Saigyō ensconced the reasons for his decision within mystery so that his contemporaries, as well as later generations of readers, would come to see it as he wanted it to be seen: as a decision to lead a qualitatively different kind of life, one with spiritual practice at its core. Disappointments in love, jiltings, and the like can never, at least to this way of thinking, be more than catalysts. When profounder and more powerful patterns of karmic causality are assumed to be what is really at work, more proximate events, such as erotic entanglements, exploitation, and social ignominy, are viewed as superficial facilitators, not the *cause* of a decision. Being a Buddhist and in a medieval rather than a modern context, Saigyō himself would have approached the question of causality in this way.

Whether or not he was married at this time is another unknown. The *Sompi-bunmyaku*, an often-reliable record of genealogies compiled during the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, lists Saigyō as having a son named Ryūshō. It is quite possible, however, that another monk by this name who was a contemporary of Saigyō's was mistakenly listed as his son. The fictive and hagiographic *Tale of Saigyō*, written probably during the thirteenth century, makes him out to have had a daughter whom he literally had to cast aside in order to become a monk. The problem with this work, however, is that, in its eagerness to form connections between Saigyō and Shakyamuni, it invents events—in this case perhaps a child who serves as obstacle to the act of leaving the householding life. Therefore, the evidence is a bit too shaky to portray Norikiyo as having had a wife and children.

Another “loud silence” claims our attention. Nowhere does this man who became a monk in 1140 tell us at which temple he was tonsured or where he took his vows. Someone in some temple accepted his request to become a monk and gave him a dharma-name, but we know nothing of the context of his vows, or of the rationale for the religious names he received. This is because neither he, nor any contemporaneous document, tell us anything.

If we can see this as an *intentional* silence, it may indicate that he included himself among those monks of his age who had no desire to live within temples or monastic compounds or to follow their daily routines. Saigyō defines

himself as being among a number of monks in his time who chose to live on the periphery of temples and monasteries. They lived in small hermitages that typically could house no more than one person. Such monks would, we now know, periodically receive some food and other provisions from the temple nearby and would, to reciprocate, go at times on tours to collect money, hopefully in large rather than small amounts, from laypersons wanting to get merit thereby. To earn the right to be a monk, but not to have to live within a temple or monastery, involved a certain trade-off. Saigyō, at least late in his life, had almost certainly been on such a tour for donations, and it is likely that his unusually extensive travels throughout Japan were related to one or another project for which donations were needed.

During the first couple of years after being tonsured, Saigyō lived either on the periphery of the capital or within walking distance of it. We have poems from this period expressing worry that living on the Eastern Hills was not giving him the necessary distance from “the world.” Then he went further—for instance, to Kurama, on mountains within two or three day’s journey by foot from Heian. Since he left the court during the fall, it was probably during his first winter alone that he records the misery he had been feeling within the capital. He felt the impact of his decision physically.

Having made my escape from a worldly way of life, I was in the interior of Kurama at a bamboo conduit, the water of which was frozen and not flowing. Hearing from someone that this would be the state of affairs until the arrival of spring, I wrote this poem:

*warinashiya
kōru kakei no
mizu yue ni
omoisuteteshi
haru no mataruru*

623

It was bound to be:
my vow to be unattached
to seasons and such—
I, who by a frozen bamboo pipe
now wait for water, long for spring.

While we cannot ignore the possibility that he had resided within temples at one time or another, neither he or nor anyone else suggests as much. If, indeed, his family was as wealthy as one source suggests, his basic needs may have been provided for by relatives with whom he linked up during his frequent travels.

What we know of Saigyō through his poetry and the prose he wrote to accompany it forcefully indicates that he considered the core of his vocation as a Buddhist to lie in the relatively solitary life of the monk, separated not only from the secular world, but also from the world of the large temple or monastery. He was probably among those monks of the twelfth century who profoundly disliked the competition, cutthroat at times, for rank and privilege among monks within individual temples, and also between temples. Entire monasteries were at times in something close to a state of war with one another.

Physical fighting between bands of monks was anything but uncommon. Many of the larger temples kept at their disposal ruffians who, dressed in robes, could be directed to intimidate either secular officials or rival temples and shrines. But not a few of these purveyors of violence and mayhem were themselves ordained monks—in spite of the fact that carrying anything like a weapon was strictly forbidden in the monastic regulations. Conflicts between the two major monasteries of the Tendai School took an especially overt form during Norikiyo's lifetime: In 1121, three years after his birth, and then again in 1140—that is, the exact same year of his *shukke*—warrior-monks from Enryaku-ji burned Miidera Temple (Onjō-ji), its bitter rival.

Saigyō occasionally expresses his desire to leave behind the accumulated bad karma of his family's long warrior tradition. This theme becomes ever more pronounced as his life moves along. And since something of this motif probably entered into his decision to become a monk in the first place, it would naturally have seemed meaningless for him to try to find peace while living within a temple rank with internal competition and out to topple its rivals by physical force. One of his poems appears to express precisely such an awareness:

sutetaredo
kakurete sumanu
hito ni nareba

To think you've thrown
the world away and then still
live unhidden is
to be like any other worldling
still dwelling in the world of men.

The correlate to this is the wealth of poems that express either the pleasure Saigyō finds in leading the reclusive life or the suffering he encounters once he really tries to do so. Japanese scholars today have disproven earlier suggestions that this was merely a literary pose, a fictional persona. Although he was not the complete recluse or constant pilgrim that some of the later hagiographies made him out to be, it seems quite clear that Saigyō spent a good deal of time in hermitages that were relatively separate from society and made journeys that, even if not constant, show him to have possibly been the most wide-ranging pilgrim of his time.

First, however, he had to extricate himself from the capital. During his time on the Eastern Hills he was still in an area where, as evinced earlier, members of the courtier class could easily go for poem-writing excursions. The temples there had monks much involved—socially, politically, and literarily—with the courtiers in the palaces and mansions not very far away. If Saigyō were still, even occasionally, meeting some of the same persons with whom he had been involved on an erotic level before having taken Buddhist vows, he no doubt sensed a contradiction, one that either then or later could have been a personal experience informing the “To think you’ve thrown the world away” poem.

Fujiwara Yorinaga (1120–56), whose diary, *Taiki*, is one of the most highly regarded sources for information on the period, recorded that on the fifteenth day of the third lunar month of 1142, the monk Saigyō came to visit for the purpose of sutra-copying. The text mentions that two retired emperors (Toba and Sutoku) were connected with this activity, and, since the date for this falls within a month of Empress Taikenmon-in’s tonsuring and entry into the status of Buddhist nun, it is assumed that Saigyō, well known to all these people, was being brought on board for what he could do for them in his new

capacity. Formerly their guard and sometime companion, he was now their priest. Taikenmon-in, who may have had a lingering illness, died within three years at age forty-five. Her relatively early death spared her the necessity of witnessing the open strife and tragedies that would befall many of these royal persons within little more than a decade.



The following poem, most (but not all) scholars agree, appears to have been composed within a couple years of Saigyō's *shukke*. It shows up after his decision to make a more clean and unambiguous break with the society and culture of the capital.

Having separated from the world, I was at Deer-bell Mountain
(Suzuka-yama) on the way to Ise:

suzukayama
ukiyo o yoso ni
furisutete
ika ni nariyuku
waga mi naruran

796 [1611]

Shaking the bell
on this mountain, am I loosened from
the world now?
Can I shake my self enough
to know what lies ahead for me?

There is an intensity in this query about the need to go strongly up against all that holds one to older, well-grooved patterns of life. Kubota finds it significant that, although this particular mountain was notorious for outlaws who would rob and terrorize travelers, Saigyō's poem focuses entirely upon the struggle with his internal demons. What threatened him, at least from his own account, was his hankering for the left-behind world, since it could easily rob him of his vocation. In many ways it would turn out to be a lifelong struggle.

Ise is not geographically very far from Mount Kōya, where Kūkai (774–835)

had begun the construction of what eventually, at least by Saigyō's day, would become a large monastic complex. He, like not a few others, seems to have taken up residence in a hermitage somewhere in the precincts of Kōya. Saigyō greatly admired Kūkai, early Japan's brilliant master of multiple skills and foremost transmitter of esoteric Buddhism.

From the perspective of the capital, Kōya was very remote, and Saigyō employed this theme of remoteness as the opening line in a series of ten poems. He notes that he wrote them at Kōya and sent them to Jakunen, a monk living at that time in Ōhara. Jakunen sent ten of his own poems in response. Saigyō records that what he sees in this place differs greatly from what would be seen back in the city. Two of this set are:

yama fukami
koke no mushiro no
ue ni ite
nani kokoro naku
naku mashira kana

1289

Deep in the mountains—
sitting upright on moss used
as a mat for himself,
with not a care in the world—
is a gibbering, chattering ape.

yama fukami
kejikaki tori no
oto wa sede
mono osoroshiki
fukurō no koe

1291

Deep in the mountains—
no song of birds close to what
we knew at home,
just the spine-tingling hoots
of owls in the night.

In verses such as these, the poet accents the physical and social distance placed between himself and urban society.

A more rigorous practice of Buddhist regimens for both body and mind shows up in the multiple poems he wrote about being on Mount Ōmine, a site in that period for undergoing severe, often painful, disciplines. Kubota notes that these disciplines were to emulate the sufferings of beings in the three lower realms of the six-tiered Buddhist cosmology. Hauling heavy burdens up and down such mountains gave one the experience of life as an animal. Receiving only meager provisions of food provided insight into the fate of hungry ghosts. Being tongue-lashed with accounts of one's every fault and physically beaten with canes provided a taste of life in hell. Saigyō hints at the rigors of Ōmine's routes in the following:

At a place called Ants' Crossing:

*sasa fukami
kiri kosu kuki o
asa tachite
nabiki wazurau
ari-no-towatari*

1203

Crack-of-morning
climb from caves in thick
bamboo grass beyond
the mists: body now bending along
stark rock forms at Ants' Crossing.

Most of the poems about this place, however, celebrate the results, and these are uniformly positive. Some of Saigyō's splendid poems about the moon and the increasing clarity of his own mind seem to flow directly from the austerities undertaken at this point in his life.

On seeing the moon at the place called Shinsen on Mount Ōmine:

*fukaki yama ni
sumikeru tsuki o*