

Hakanashi, Mujō and Beyond:

On Karaki Junzō's Theory of Impermanence

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1. Introduction

While Heraclitus is famously known for his claim that everything flows (*Πάντα ῥεῖ*), Buddhism provides a similar statement that all conditioned things are *aniccā* (impermanent). Without doubt, the notion of impermanence is crucial for us to understand not only Buddhism but also East Asian philosophies. In “The Great Earthquake Disaster and the Japanese View of Nature,” Noe Keiichi (野家啓一) quotes Terada Torahiko (寺田寅彦, 1878-1935), a scientist trying to link Japanese's view of nature with the Buddhist notion of impermanence. Terada writes,

Why was Buddhism imported from a distant country to take root and mature in Japan? It is because a variety of factors within Buddhism were accommodating to the Japanese climate. In my opinion, one factor is that the idea of impermanence based on Buddhism mutually accords with the basic Japanese view of nature. Without mentioning Kamo no Chōmei's book *Hōjōki*, for people who live in a country where disasters of earthquakes and floods are frequent and unpredictable, a natural impermanence permeates their internal organs (consider removal) as memory inherited from remote ancestors.¹

In the very beginning of *Hōjōki* (*An Account of My Hut*), Kamo no Chōmei (鴨長明, 1155-1216) writes, “The flow of water is ceaseless and its water is never the same. The bubbles that float in the pools, now vanishing, now forming, are not of long duration: so in the world are man and his dwellings.”² Chōmei records disasters in Kyoto such as fire,

¹ Quoted in Noe Keiichi, “The Great Earthquake Disaster and the Japanese View of Nature,” *Journal of Japanese Philosophy*, SUNY Press, Vol. 5, 2018: 3.

² Keene, 1995: 197.

wind and famine. He also writes the following on earthquake,

Of the four great elements, water, fire, and wind are continually causing disasters, but the earth does not normally afflict man. Long ago, during the great earthquake of the year 855, the head of the Buddha of the Tōdaiji fell off, a terrible misfortune, indeed, but not the equal of the present disaster. At the time everyone spoke of the vanity and meaninglessness of the world, and it seemed that the impurities of men's hearts had somewhat lessened, but with the passage of the months and the days and the coming of the new year people no longer even spoke in that vein.³

Although Chōmei managed to survive natural disasters, he had a miserable career in Kyoto. Later, he decided to move to Ohara north of Kyoto, for a simple life – that is, to live in a small hut. Had he written more prolifically he might have provided us with some insights on how to live in this impermanent world. So how should we understand impermanence in a philosophical way?

In this paper, I will introduce Karaki Junzō's (唐木順三, 1904-1980) theory of impermanence, and to explore how this theory can deepen our understanding of our contemporary world.

2. Karaki's theory of impermanence

In *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, Matsumaru Hisao (松丸壽雄) introduces Karaki as a critic who had a close relationship with Kyoto School philosophers: "He [Karaki] was active throughout the Shōwa period more as a critic than a philosopher professionally trained in western sources. He studied under Nishida Kitarō at Kyoto University and remained indebted to the thinking of Kyoto School philosophers throughout his life."⁴ We should notice that Karaki did not develop his career in Kyoto; rather, he became a Professor of Literature at Meiji University.⁵ Karaki's work *Mujō* (published in 1964) can be seen as his theoretic analysis on impermanence. It is divided into three parts: *Hakanashi* (はかなし), impermanence (無常) and metaphysics of impermanence (無常の形而上学). Hereafter, I will give a brief introduction to these notions of impermanence.

³ Keene, 1955: 204.

⁴ Heisig, Maraldo, Kasulis (eds), *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011: 227. Hereafter abbreviated as SB.

⁵ The philosophy program of Meiji University has just begun since 2018.

2.1 *Hakanashi*: Women's notion of impermanence

In Japanese, *hakanai* (はかない, 果敢ない, 儚い) is an adjective to describe things that “cannot be measured.” It means something momentary, short-lived and transient. Some typical examples are dreams, life and flowers. One can definitely appreciate the *hakanasa* (noun of *hakanai*) of Dutchman's Pipe Cactus or *Gekkabijin*, a flower that only blooms for one night.

In classical Japanese literature, *hakanashi* is the word to express this delicate feeling of impermanence or fragility. In *The Diary of Izumi Shikibu* (1002-1003), the author writes: “I keep grieving day and night [in palace] about life, which is something more fragile than dreams.”⁶ Another example is a passage on the impermanence of life in *The Tale of Genji* (1008), written by Murasaki Shikibu (紫式部):

Life is short, but we must cherish every moment of our life, even a day or two.⁷

One should notice that these delicate feelings are expressed by elite women writers, who observed different kinds of love affairs in the palace, and experienced an uncertain or anxious feeling. However, Karaki suggests Murasaki Shikibu might have a different story. He writes, “Living a relatively stable life, Murasaki Shikibu reached the truth of *sukuse* (宿世) by radicalizing this stability in human's *hakanaki* and the *awaresa* of men and women.”⁸

To deepen our understanding of this feeling of impermanence, I would like to mention the study of *sukuse* by Satō Sekiko (佐藤勢紀子). In *Genji Monogatari*, there is a paragraph on the *sukuse* or the floating life of women:

Unlike what might have thought, this is life. From past to present, life is always changing. In particular, it is sad that woman's *sukuse* is floating.⁹

Satō notices that in edition of *Nihon Koten Bungaku Taikei*, *sukuse* is translated as *shukumei* (fate) in modern Japanese:

⁶ 夢よりもはかなき世の中を嘆きわびつつ明かし暮らす(English translation is mine unless otherwise noted.)

⁷ 人の命、久しかるまじき物なれど、残りの命、一二日をも惜しまずば、あるべからず (手習 1.3.19)

⁸ Karaki 2002: 201.

⁹ 不意に、かくてものははべるなり。世の中といふもの、さのみこそ、今も昔も、定まりたることはべらね。中についても、女の宿世は浮かびたるなむ、あはれにはべる。(帚木 3.2.18)

It is sad that the fate (or destiny) of a woman is (uncertain) in a floating state (that can be anything depending on men).¹⁰

While Yosano Akiko (与謝野晶子, 1878-1942)¹¹ and Setouchi Jyakuchō (瀬戸内寂聴)¹² translated *sukuse* as *unmei* 運命 (fate), I would like to bring to attention the fact that Chinese translations of *Genji Monogatari*, by Feng Zikai (豐子愷, 1898-1975)¹³ and Lin Wenyue (林文月)¹⁴ for examples, also translate *sukuse* as *mingyun* 命運 (fate). According to Satō, *sukuse* is clearly not fate. As she explains, “Here, the expression ‘fate’ is used as a translation of ‘*sukuse*’ for it expresses the meaning that everything is difficult to change. However, it contradicts with the meaning of “uncertain” (当てにならず) or “can be anything (何とでもなる).”¹⁵

Here, I would like to comment on two points. First, while fate is for all genders, *sukuse* only applies to women. Elite women realize that, inside the palace, women are always controlled by men. In this sense, nothing is certain or determined. In other words, life is fragile and anything can happen. Secondly, if *sukuse* is not about necessity (everything is pre-determined and cannot be changed), it is about contingency (nothing is certain and anything goes). Kuki Shūzō (九鬼周造, 1888-1941) provides an analysis on contingency as follows:

The import of the contingency we find in the content and form of literature lies in the metaphysical sense of wonder and the philosophical beauty that accompanies it. In a word, the sense of wonder that accompanies contingency in metaphysical terms is the emotion that moves us to seek a reason for the shift from nonexistence to existence, from existence to nonexistence. Contingency signifies the possibility of nonexistence. As Shakespeare says, “it hath no bottom.” For Hegel, contingency evokes “absolute distress” (*absolute Unruhe*) for the same reason: *Es hat keinen Grund*. In contingency, nonexistence transgresses upon existence. To that extent,

¹⁰ 女の宿命（運）などは、（ちっとも当てにならず）浮かんでいる状態（男次第で何とでもなるもの）であるのが、如何にも可愛そうでございます。（Quoted in Sato 1995: 1）

¹¹ 不意にそうなったのでございます。まあ人というものは昔も今も意外なふうにも変わってゆくものですが、その中でも女の運命ほどはかないものはございません。（Yosano, 1971(上巻): 60）

¹² 思いがけない縁で、父のもとにまいったのでございます。全く男女の仲というものはこうしたものでして、今も昔もどうなるか決まっておられません。そういうなかでも女の運命というものは浮き草のようにただよい、哀れなものでございます。（Setouchi, 2007(巻一): 60）

¹³ 男女因縁，従古以來難以捉摸。女人的命運，尤為渺茫難知，真可憐啊！（Feng, 2017: 36）

¹⁴ 是偶然的緣份促成這樣的。世事真難以逆料，尤其婦道人家的命運更是如浮萍一般飄移不可把握呢。（Lin, 2000(第一冊): 39）

¹⁵ Satō Sekiko, *Sukuse no Shisō*, Tokyo: Perikansha, 1995: 1-2.

contingency implies fragile existence.¹⁶

Kuki's thought implies that our fragile existence cannot be explained by necessity but only by contingency, which is related to the metaphysical sense of wonder. We will see (in section 2.3) that the metaphysics of impermanence is not a feeling of impermanence.

2.2 Impermanence: Men's notion of impermanence

Karaki insists there is a gender difference regarding the feeling of impermanence. If *hakanashi* is a feeling of impermanence for elite women living inside the palace, how about the feeling of impermanence for men living outside the palace? Karaki answers,

[Men's] Impermanence is born when palace culture is removed from *hakanashi*. When the subtle meaning of *hakanashi* is lost, it becomes the grave-less (*haka-nashi*) in *Konjyaku Monogatari*. To ordinary men or local people without a good education, subtlety or refinedness is meaningless; rather, they only care about war and daily life, that is, to follow the things, calculate everything, and face life directly.¹⁷

In the case of war, soldiers would have to prepare for death at any moment. This feeling of impermanence for men is nothing but the existential fear of death. Anyone can be killed in a battlefield without a proper grave. In Japanese, the word for being "grave-less" (墓ナシ) and *hakanashi* (はかなし) have the same pronunciation. However, this straightforward feeling of impermanence in men (soldiers) is according to Karaki essentially different to the delicate feeling of impermanence in women – and at that, the elite writers amongst them.¹⁸

Yet it will be wrong to claim that in the case of classical literature written by men, the feeling of impermanence is not as sophisticated. Even the rich and the powerful must perish, as we can read from the first few lines of *The Tale of Heike* (1240):

The sound of the bell of *Gionshoja* resonates with the impermanence of all things. The colour of the flowers of *Shorea robusta* shows the truth that power must perish. Like a night dream in spring, even a proud man will not be forever. Same as the dust before the wind, even a strong man will be destroyed.¹⁹

¹⁶ SB 846.

¹⁷ Karaki, *Mujō*, in *Kyoto Tetsugaku Sensho*, Vol. 26, Kyoto: Tōeisha, 2002: 299-300.

¹⁸ "Haka-nashi" (墓ナシ) can be found in *Konjyaku Monogatari*, Vol. 29, Story 23. Quoted in Karaki 2002: 206.

¹⁹ 祇園精舎の鐘の声、諸行無常の響きあり。娑羅双樹の花の色、盛者必衰の理をあらはす。奢

Beyond the battlefield, some men are able to express the feeling of impermanence with the sensitivity of poets. Karaki mentions the following *bibun* 美文 (aesthetical expressions) written by male poets about the ever-changing world. In the case of Jōkei (貞慶, 1155-1213), for example,

It is difficult to keep the leaves on a tree, but it is easy for dew on the grass to vanish. While smoke appears in the countryside, it could be your turn today or tomorrow. As moss grows in the garden, it could be waiting for sunrise or sunset. People are crying in the south and in the north. Tears are running to the mountain and the plain. The soil that buries bones is never dried.²⁰

Rennyō (蓮如, 1415-1499) also expresses the uncertainty of life in the following way,

It is easy to live your life... You do not know who will die first: yourself or the other. You do not know when will it come: today or tomorrow. Those who have passed away are as many as dews or raindrops. In the morning, your girl is still there; by the evening, she has become bones.²¹

Karaki also mentions the expression of “flying flowers and falling leaves,” which is discussed by many male poets. For example, Shinkei (心敬, 1406-1475) writes,

The heart is important. When you see flying flowers and falling leaves, or the dews on plants, you can be aware of the illusion of this mundane world. You should be nice to others and hold the heart of *yūgen*.²²

Sōgi (宗祇, 1421-1502) further develops this idea in the following manner,

れる人も久しからず、ただ春の夜の夢のごとし。猛き者もつひにはほろびぬ、ひとへに風の前の塵に同じ。

²⁰ 風葉の身保ち難く、草露の命消え易し。野辺の煙と昇らんこと、今日にあるか、明日に在るか。芒庭の苔に伴はんこと、晨を待つや、暮を待つや。南隣に哭し、北里に哭す。人を送る泪、未だ尽きず、山下に惨へ、原上に惨ふ。骨を埋む土、乾くことなし。(Quoted in Karaki 2002: 297)

²¹ 一生過ぎ易し (中略)。我や先、人や先、今日とも知らず、明日とも知らず。おくれ先だつ人は、本の雫、末の露よりも繁しといへり。されば朝には紅顔ありて、夕には白骨となれる身なり。(Quoted in Karaki 2002: 298)

²² 心もち肝要にて候。常に飛花落葉を見ても草木の露をながめても、此世の夢まぼろしの心を思ひとり、ふるまひをやさしくし、幽玄に心をとめよ。(Quoted in Karaki 2002: 324)

The way of poem is nothing but compassion. Even you see the flying flowers and falling leaves, you can tackle the demon in your heart and be a true self if you understand the truth about life and death.²³

While Matsuo Bashō (松尾芭蕉, 1644-1694) sees flying flowers and falling leaves, he expresses the feeling of impermanence in the following *haiku*:

There is no sign
of its own death in
cicada's song²⁴

In his discussion of the “feeling of impermanence,” Karaki did not quote any work from women writers. However, I would like to quote Tarawa Machi (俵万智), who is a famous female *tanka* poet. Some of her poems on flowers are:

He loves me,
he loves me not. I'd be
all right if I had
one love, say, for each
of the counted petals.²⁵

As if in this park
nothing at all has happened
the cherry blossoms
have bloomed, blossomed, scattered:
*sakura sakura sakura...*²⁶

Gentle, isn't it?
Cosmos blooming in the sun
translucent purple;
lacking all knowledge
of last year's autumn.²⁷

²³ 歌の道は、只慈悲をこころにかけて、飛花落葉を見ても、生死の理を観ずれば、心中の鬼神もやはらぎて、本覚真如のことわりに帰るべく候。(Quoted in Karaki 2002: 324-325)

²⁴ やがて死ぬけしきは見えず蟬の声 (Quoted by Karaki 2002: 343)

²⁵ 愛してる愛していない花びらの数だけ愛があればいいのに (Tawara Machi and Jack Stamm 2017: 85)

²⁶ さくらさくらさくら咲き初め咲き終りなにもなかったような公園 (Ibid, 142)

²⁷ やさしいね陽のむらさきに透けて咲く去年の秋を知らぬコスモス (Ibid, 163)

One may say Tawara is an elite woman, and hence her feeling of impermanence should be categorized as *hakanashi*. As a single mother, however, she is determined to live a life beyond the social stereotype. Living in a contemporary and yet secular world, it is important to be more tolerant to differences in genders and life styles. Following this sense, I would like to argue that poets from all genders can express their feelings of impermanence.

2.3 Metaphysics of impermanence: Dōgen's philosophy of impermanence

No matter the feeling of impermanence is gendered or not, Karaki would argue that feeling of impermanence should not be confused with the metaphysics of impermanence. Here, the metaphysics of impermanence is not an appreciation of or an aesthetics on impermanence. Karaki is referring specifically to the philosophy of Dōgen (道元, 1200-1253), one of the most important Zen monks or philosophers in Japan.

To begin with, Karaki mentions Dōgen's childhood trauma: Dōgen's mother passed away when he was 8 years old. Nonetheless, this traumatic experience could only bring him the mere feeling of impermanence. Later, Dōgen managed to philosophize the problem of impermanence. In Karaki's own words,

In 95 chapters of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*, we can see a shift from *hakanashi* to *mujō*, from the feeling of impermanence or aesthetics of impermanence to a radical idea of impermanence, in which *mujō* as such is the reality.²⁸

Here, *mujō* as such does not mean a feeling or a thing that can be separated from the mind; rather impermanence is the sole reality. In short, impermanence is not an object or a thing. In Karaki's words, "Impermanence as such embraces in itself both the self and the mind. It is not impermanence as an object of cognition. It may be called metaphysical impermanence." (SB 230)²⁹

How can we understand "metaphysical impermanence"? This is related to the temporality of impermanence. Time is not a thing, but is related to nothingness. Karaki explains,

²⁸ 「はかなし」から「無常」へ、そこはかとなき無常感覚または無常美感から、徹底した無常観へ、無常こそまさに現実であるというところへ出たのが『正法眼蔵』九十五巻の道元であった。(Karaki 2002: 137)

²⁹ 無常そのもの、我をも、心をも、そのうちにふくんでいる無常である。認識の対象としての無常ではなく、形而上的な無常といってよい。(Karaki 2002: 357)

The time of impermanence and change does not advance in a linear and continuous way toward a fixed point of arrival, toward a destination. The impermanence of arising-and-extinction, continually arising and continually passing away, is time in its naked form. Time is originally a purposeless, discontinuous, instantaneous arising-and-extinction, instantaneous arising of phenomena. We might say that the manifest shape of time is the infinite repetition of meaningless things. If we see that time is not a progress directed to a goal, then it does not advance in the direction of nothingness, death, and extinction. On the contrary, time is continually connected with nothingness. In the discontinuous chasm of no beginning and no end, the bottomless abyss of nothingness is yawning. The time of repetition is nothingness. This can indeed be called nihilism. Time is the endless repetition of meaningless things rooted in nothingness. Human life, all phenomena, the whole universe, since they exist nowhere but in time, are in the end nothing, meaningless, and impermanence is clearly shown to be such nothingness and meaninglessness. Impermanence is a cold fact, an actuality quite unrelated to emotions of wonder, poetic sentiment, and the like.³⁰

The notion of “cold fact” deserves some further explanation. It is cold or hard because it is meaningless, but human beings will try their best to shift their attention to other things which are meaningful. Karaki continues, “Since humans cannot face this cold nihilism, they create all kinds of lofty ideas. The idea that time is infinite repetition without beginning or end robs the point in time we call ‘the present’ of all meaning and value. Without meaning, humans do not have the courage even to live. They adorn time in order to confer meaning, putting into effect various methods of creating meaning.” (SB 231)³¹ For examples, one can suggest there is a beginning in time; other suggests there is an end in time. Others may try to confer a significance on time by building temples and pagodas, which is “a way of artificially adorning the present. Humans, through believing in civilization and progress, are able to affirm time and life.” (SB 232) Karaki concludes,

Dōgen repeatedly rejected the above conferral of adornment and significance on time. Time just as it is, in its nakedness, is to be faced squarely. Time, without beginning or end, is to be confronted without purpose or action. Without blinking we must face the reality of the time of instantaneous arising and ceasing,

³⁰ 無常は、詠嘆の感情、情緒などとは全く無縁な冷厳な事実、現実である。(Karaki 2002: 359)

³¹ ひとはこの冷厳なニヒリズムに堪えることができなくて、さまざまな意匠をつくりだす。(Karaki 2002: 359-360)

instantaneous production. This is a gate through which one has to pass. There is no Zen if one does not look clearly at this. (SB p. 232)³²

Karaki did not further explain the meaning of the “gate” (関門), but we can refer to the first *kōan* of *The Gateless Gate* (無門関): “Does dog have Buddha nature?” One might expect either “yes” or “no” as the answer. However, Monk Joshū replies with only one word: “Nothing (無).” It is clear that nothing is not “no” (negation) or “non-being.” In Cantonese, there are three different characters about being, non-being and nothing:

Character	Pronunciation	Meaning
有	yau5	being / affirmation
冇	mou5	non-being / negation
無	mou4	nothing

Similarly, we can see that impermanence should not be understood as the negation of permanence (not-being-permanence):

Characters	Pronunciation	Meaning
有常	yau5 sheung4	being-permanence
冇常	mou5 sheung4	not-being-permanence
無常	mou4 sheung4	impermanence

The Gateless Gate shows that nothing is neither being nor non-being. We can also say that impermanence is neither being-permanence nor not-being-permanence. *Mujō* is beyond things that are not permanent.

3. My concluding remarks

Readers of *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* may find the following description on Karaki’s theory of impermanence:

Karaki’s 1963 book, *Impermanence*, from which the following pages have been

³² 道元はくりかえし右のような時間の装飾化、有意味化を否定して、ありのままの時間、裸裸の時間に面面相対する。無始無終の時間に無為無作で向かい合う。刹那生滅、刹那生起の時間のリアリティに、まばたきもせずに対面する。ここは通過せねばならぬ関門である。ここを透関せずして禅はない。(Karaki 2002: 361)

extracted, is an extended attempt to clarify the sense of the transiency of all things that he sees as defining the Japanese mentality from the Middle Ages on. Seeing the awareness of the fragility and uncertainty of existence, often associated with male warriors, as grounded in Buddhist ideas, *Karaki went on to develop a highly regarded theory of Japanese aesthetic appreciation.* (SB 227, emphasis mine)

However, as we have discussed in the previous section, Karaki's project is not to develop a theory of aesthetic appreciation. In the case of flowers, for example, no matter it is Dutchman's Pipe Cactus or the plum flower, it is meaningless to appreciate its impermanence. In Karaki's own words, "If everything is impermanent, poetic expression of impermanence has no meaning. Impermanence is meaningless."³³ I believe this philosophy can deepen our understanding of the contemporary world. Facing catastrophes, calamities, social instabilities or even the outbreak of coronavirus, people may have a strong feeling of impermanence. However, if we follow Karaki's theory of impermanence, it does not make sense to have poetic expression of impermanence only in cases of these brutal facts. Impermanence is not the feeling of being determined or overpowered. Precisely speaking, impermanence as such is not a feeling. As a final point, one may understand impermanence from the Zen teaching: "Life and death matter. Impermanence is rapid. Time does not wait. Do not be negligent."³⁴ Karaki does not urge us to appreciate life; rather, he shows us the "gate" to philosophize impermanence.

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³³ 一切無常であるというところでは、無常への詠嘆は意味をもちえない。無常ということすら意味をもたない。(Karaki 2002: 395)

³⁴ 生死事大，無常迅速，時不待人，謹勿放逸。

Hakanashi, Mujō and Beyond

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