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Aesthetics of the Art of Flowers: *Ikebana*

See beauty in Nature,
cultivate elegance in Spirit

1. Introduction to Ikebana

Senei Ikenobo, the present Head Master of the Ikenobo School in Kyoto, has defined *ikebana* in the following way:

Beginning with the first acknowledgement of the vital force of plants, and then through this knowledge, realizing the principle which produces this force, that is to say, the creative original element that makes the universe, *ikebana* is formed into some suitable shape to display it [...]. Even in the posture of a single flower the foundation of creation, with all its variation, can be traced [...]. *Ikebana* does not merely aim to arrange flowers into a certain form, it aims rather to grasp the configuration of the vividly growing elastic force of plants, representing our earnest human desire to come to contact with the foundation of the creative power, through various floral arrangements... (STEERE 1987, p. 44)

In the manual for the style of *shoka shimputai* arrangement Senei Ikenobo writes about the art in this way:

To the eye, flowers and plants are beautiful. But the heart does not see only beautiful forms. If we look closely at plants, we come to know their purity, their lives within the endless flow of time and infinite space, feeling their singular purpose. A flower is utterly beautiful when filled by

the feeling of life. This basic perception of what underlies the beauty of plants is what we must turn to when arranging *ikebana*, rather than relying on standard patterns, colors, or forms. *Ikebana* is the distillation, as form, of our knowledge of the lives of plants, their expressive qualities and their quiet work in nature. The theme of *ikebana* is life [...]. We also are an essential part of this flow of life, and in the gentle curves of the branches of *ikebana* we sense the achievement of a beautiful moment of harmony [...]. In *ikebana* [...] we try to fully reveal life's single purpose" (IKENOBO 1988, p. 1).

Another definition for *ikebana* has been formulated by Minobu Ohi in his writing on the *History of Ikebana*:

Ikebana is an art conceived by the inspiration and desire of humanity to capture, interpret and enhance, with creative imagination and artistry, the beauty of living Way of Flowers" (STEERE 1987, p. 9).

While it could be said that human beings have adored and used flowers for decorations since human origins, the Japanese have developed and heightened the arranging of flowers into a real form of art, naming it *ikebana*, which literally means "make flowers alive" (*ikeru* = live, *hana* = flower).

The origin of *ikebana* can be said to be in the custom of putting flowers on the altar of Buddhist images as an adoration and offering, called *kuge*. Buddhism came to Japan through China in the 6th century. The chronicles say that Prince Shotoku (574-662), who greatly helped Buddhism to get established in Japan, originated the custom of *kuge* with a priest called Semmu in a temple, on the shore of a small pond, which he had built in a place which is now the centre of Kyoto. The name Ikenobo originated from the temple on the pond (*ike-no-bo*) and the masters of Ikenobo founded the first school of *ikebana* in 1462. On this very same spot, around the ancient temple, now called Rokkakudo, the present day huge compound of the Ikenobo Centre is situated.

In the Heian period, from the 8th to 12th centuries the court nobles were keenly interested in practising and developing many art forms, like music, poetry and paintings, as well as arranging

flowers for their enjoyment in living quarters without the religious purpose of offerings. In the literature of that era one may find descriptions of using flowers particularly in poetic passages conveying sentiments of persons both giving and receiving flowers in vases and baskets. An example from the *Tale of Genji* (*Genji monogatari*): Kaoru brings a branch of a plum tree to Niou and "... he found the fragrance so in harmony with his mood that he was stirred to poetry: this branch seems much in accord with him who breaks it. I catch a secret scent beneath the surface" (SHIKIBU 1993, translation, p. 874).

In *Hekizan Nichiroku*, the first record of Ikenobo, a diary of the monk Daikyoky, from the 15th century, we can read that large contests of flower arrangements were held in the Imperial Court on the day of Tanabata (the Festival of the Star Vega, the seventh day of the seventh month in the lunar calendar) from the late Kamakura period to Muromachi period (late 13th-15th centuries). These contests were called "Tanabata-e", and on this day aristocrats and monks gathered and vied with each other by demonstrating their skills of flowers arranging in offering flowers in honor of the Festival. Two master arrangers in the 15th century were Ikenobo Sengyo and Ryu-Ami, a tea master (IKENOBO, 1975, p. 3).

From the aristocratic courts *ikebana* spread also into the mansions of the shogunates of the Muromachi period, and in the 14th and 15th centuries flower arrangement became popular and competitions were held on festive occasions. Flowers became to be used also as special ornaments in festivals to attract public gaze, for instance on top of parasols, *furyugasa*, in different parades with dances. Pine branches were placed also on top of carts in processions like *Gion matsuri* in Kyoto to emphasize further the nature of both prayer, offering and public ceremony of that festival.

Famous master arrangers, already mentioned Ikenobo Sengyo from the 15th, then Ikenobo Senno from the 16th, and Ikenobo Senko from the 16th centuries made the flower art flourish by adding a deep spirit and elaborate techniques into the arrangements. The formal style of *rikka*, developed by priests for ceremonial events, had its apogee in the Momoyama period (1560-1614) thanks to Senko I and Senko II masters. Along with this

gorgeous and complicated *rikka* style, other styles gradually developed to suit different purposes, such as *chabana*, a very simple and humble arrangement for the tea ceremony, *nageire*, *shoka* and *moribana* for home *tokonoma* and other living spaces, and eventually free style during our modern times for expressions of present day creative ideas and decorative tastes.

Many schools of *ikebana* have grown alongside with the original Ikenobo, separating themselves with their own, slightly different principles for the techniques and compositions of the arrangement, and having their own symbolic names for the branches and parts of the composition. Schools were developed by masters, who wished to create their own individual expressions to the art. (e.g. Sogetsu, Ohara and Ichiyo, Saga Goryu, Ryusei-ha, Chiko, and Shinpa Seizan Schools).

2. Composition in Ikebana

Detailed rules in creating the composition in different schools extend from traditional strict and highly complicated regulations to compositions of improvised groupings of materials, and in free style the possibilities for compositions seem boundless. Yet there are at least three basic elements which are the same in all arrangements.

First, flowers and plants are deeply respected as living things according to their individual, own characters. They are chosen both for the outlook, their appearance to the eye, and for their characteristic inner features, the feeling they reflect to the heart. To know the inner character of every plant, its *shussho*, is most important in order to place it in a harmonious position in an appropriate environment and circumstance, as if growing naturally.

Second, there are three elements in the composition, which all the schools acknowledge as the basic structural and aesthetic rule. These elements represent the cosmos and are symbolically called Heaven-Earth-Man, *Ten-Chi-Jin*. In Ikenobo schools these elements take the form and name of the main branch *Shin*, the supporting branch *Soe*, and the foundation branch *Tai*. Many more branches, flowers and leaves may be added in between these three main ones, but the whole composition should give the three dimensional cosmic impression to the viewer. This principle of

triangle or trinity or triad is utmost essential. In traditional manuals it is said that a composition of any aesthetic value or one meant for aesthetic or artistic contemplation must follow the rule of this universal cosmic law of threefold forces. In his study on the *Laws of Japanese Painting*, Henry Bowie states that this is considered a universal fundamental law of correct construction, by it the work is rounded out to its perfection, by it the work satisfies the first law of composition, namely the unity in variety in the universe (BOWIE 1952, p. 52).

Third, there should be in the composition elements which suggests the time span from the past to the present to the future. This can be created by choosing plants and flowers at their different growing stages. Some plants or parts of plants refer to the fruit or passing over the blooming height, some are at the very climax of their flowering, some are still buds as allusions to the expectations of future. *Ikebana* is art of a short living moment, but with the careful selection of elements it is possible to express the timelessness and constant renewing and changing of nature. The Japanese aesthetic taste prefers suggestions rather than open exposing, therefore buds are more important than full blooms, and leafless branches are not considered dead, but concealing life's energy. In the composition there must also be an empty space, the spiritual intangible course.

Fourth, the composition must move the heart. "*Ikebana* boils down to the question of how to represent the beauty of nature, the most crucial quality is to convey the soul and spirit", as Sen'ei Ikenobo has said in interviews. *Ikebana*'s value is measured by the grace and elegance reflected from the composition directly to the viewer's heart, not by any calculations of prices of the materials.

3. *Kadô – the Way of Flowers*

To master in depth any art or skill takes a life time of learning. The same applies to *ikebana*, it is a form of art and demands devotion from those who enter into the Way of flowers, *Kadô*. To master the art of *ikebana* requires at least 7-8 years of constant practice under a fully qualified teacher. In the learning process there are three main fields: 1) theoretical instruction of the rules and princi-

ples relating to the arrangement (*gaku*), 2) technical practising of making the compositions (*jutsu*), and 3) spiritual development of the mind of the learner to follow the Way (*dō*). In the first field the master transmits on to the learner all the essential technical and aesthetic knowledge regarding the basis of the art, in the second field he/she corrects and perfects the learner's arrangements until they reach required qualities, and in the third field he/she guides the learner in the spiritual path by his/her own personality, example and conduct as well as with the attitude and devotion to his/her own Way. The first two fields of the learning process can be described as tangible, or "outward" aspects of the art. The third one is intangible, an "inward" aspect of it, whose presence can be felt intuitively only, and which has to be cultivated within the learner's inner soul. This inner quality grows and develops from within the learner alongside with the expanded knowledge, provided the learner has the aptitude and desire to proceed into higher and ever more refined stages in the path. Concrete practising trains the eye, strengthens the assuredness of perception and improves the dexterity in actual building of the arrangement. To advance in the Way of Flowers all three fields of learning are essential, they form an unity for attaining the disposition of an harmonious creation and of an achievement of excellence.

The diversity of flora in nature is great, and by cultivation and scientific improvement of species the variety has been made almost limitless. Plants, their growing and flowering, provide an inexhaustible field of study for natural scientists and cultivators. The study of nature for those engaged in *Kadō* is not, however, only acquiring objective information of the features and characteristics of plants and flowers. Nature is considered to embrace spiritually the whole universe, and the natural environment includes all the elements in it, also human beings. Thus we can say that knowledge of nature which we acquire through rational natural sciences gives us only a partial understanding of nature, we need to learn also about the living life spirit behind the appearances, and about the beauty inherent in nature. This we can do only through our senses, by our own sensitivity towards things.

In the customary western thinking there is a clear distinction of disciplines in learning. The fields of philosophy, biology, aesthetics, art, and religion, for instance, have their own languages and rather hermeneutic approaches to their subjects. Beauty belongs to the concepts of aesthetics and art, not to biology or other disciplines. In the traditional eastern thinking, however, there has been a holistic philosophic-aesthetic-religious perception of things in nature. The Buddhist Law of Nature, the Shintoist *Kami*, the Taoist Heaven and Earth, and the Confucian Ritual and Moral Order embrace things in a unifying manner, the subject being in the object and the object in the subject. Beauty is also considered a natural property of the universe, seen at differing profundity, as expressed in an old Chinese saying, which a Chinese scholar quoted in a discussion: “In the natural world beauty is external, whilst it is the inmost quality of the Divine”.

Kitaro Nishida (1870-1945), one of Japan’s foremost philosophers, argued that western cultures are basing their reality on being, while eastern cultures have nothingness as the basis of their reality. They are cultures of form and sound and those of the formless and the soundless respectively. Thus, the Japanese culture has traditionally given more importance to the emotional side of thinking than to rational analysing. According to Nishida, the Japanese way of experiencing the world is based on an emotional disposition, it is a culture of feeling in a philosophical sense. This means feelings are not merely individual but impersonal, abstract, existing in space, where they can affect upon human beings. Nishida speaks of pure feelings, in which there is neither interior nor exterior, and in which the ‘aware’ of things (the deep feeling over and in things) can also be felt. The subjectivity determines the objectivity, and also the objectivity determines subjectivity, the world can thus be thought to determine itself both subjectively and objectively. The world is self-determining, in both linear and circular forms. Therefore in the world of concrete actuality, things are expressive, and we see things through acting. The actual world determines itself expressively (NISHIDA 1970, p. 237). This means that we are active parts in our whole environment, with our actions

we create our environment, and our environment influences us both physically, and aesthetically, socially and psychologically.

When we study nature with the disposition of feelings, as explained by Nishida, we study the environment through being One with it, in Basho's words: "to learn about the pine, go to the pine; to learn about the bamboo, go to the bamboo" (UEDA 1992, p. 27). In this way we acquire true, direct knowledge of the inner qualities and characteristics of all different plants, trees, flowers, stones, and other elements of nature. In a man-made environment we sense the atmosphere or the spirit of the place. In *Kadô* we study nature, and further other environments, in this immediately sensing manner, and learn how the nothingness expresses itself in the abundance of forms, colours and their countless combinations in different stages of life's circle. Knowledge of nature, based on its keen observation with immanent feelings and intuitive grasp of its spirituality, is essential to understanding *Kadô* and to advancing in it, as well as in creating successful *ikebana*.

Sen'ei Ikenobo has said that within a single *ikebana*, which is the distillation as form of our knowledge of the lives of plants, we can see their expressive qualities and their quiet work in nature. Within the endless varied flow of time, flowers and plants achieve a beautiful harmony at each moment. It is this natural harmony which we can create through *ikebana* and which can further expand beyond a single arrangement to affect the environment at large. Through the beauty and the harmony seen in plants our mind and whole person can be elevated beyond time, as Kitaro Nishida has said: "The Beautiful is the revelation of the Eternity" (NISHIDA 1976, p. 33).

We can say that *Kadô* provides us lifelong, continuous education on the wisdom of nature in a holistic sense, including natural sciences and environmental aesthetics.

4. Ikebana, Means of Realization of the Self

Led by the philosophy of Nishida we can say that when studying nature with full intellect and intuition we learn about the different outer and inner forms and qualities of things, whether plants, trees, flowers or other objects. Our creative mind can

transform these shapes and qualities into materials for our expressions. We can say that we spiritualize nature and conceive symbols and metaphors of natural things. Then, when desiring to convey our thoughts and feelings, we have means for self expression in the forms of these things from nature.

To refer again to Ikenobo masters *ikebana* is always created with an idea to be expressed within space and time. In the most abstract sense it is the very purpose of life, but it can be an idea from an every day situation within human communications. All human feelings can be suggestively expressed by and in *ikebana*, for example happiness, joy, friendliness, respect, adoration, longing, congratulations, prayers, wishes for success, majesty, strength, and power, as well as sadness, sorrow, melancholy, even anger, displeasure, bitterness, and envy. Expressed in a symbolic or metaphoric language the feelings transcend mere personal subjectivity and become sublimated and recreated manifestations of those feelings. The self has expressed itself through artistic creation in a unifying manner with nature.

Human imagination searches forms for its expression either from the reality or from the world of fancy and dreams. Modernity stresses the power of the mind to create independently. It acclaims the freedom of the mind to act and produce.

Kadô is by no means against the free will of the mind, but it argues that in order to create forms with real significance and impression for the viewer, the mind should not get divorced from the world of nature; nature should be considered its primary, and limitless source of forms to be further refined. When the suchness of flowers and plants is deeply understood with intuitive sensitivity, harmony comes naturally to the product, not by calculations of proportions.

The basic question of the purpose of human life remains unanswered, but there is however a strong endeavour to realize in a subtle, refined way impulses from the inner original self, in various degrees, in all individuals. There is a Treasure within us. The basic principle in it is to let the inner self of each person actualize into its fullest beautiful bloom from within through interaction with the environment in the most natural way. The originally oriental con-

cept of *dô* is a method to lead a person in this self-actualizing path. *Kadô*, as one form of *dô*, enhances intuitive relation with and learning from nature, and through its rich, symbolic and metaphoric expressions it truly enables our inner world to grow and open to full realization of all three levels of beauty (*hana*, *yugen* and *rojaku*).

5. Ikebana – Visual Poetry

Ikebana is visual art, as we perceive it with the eyes, but it has different properties from paintings and statues. It could be called most realistic art, since the material used comes directly from nature, yet it is transient, changing, and its message is symbolic, metaphoric and poetic. It is performing art, flowers do make impressive performances, in exhibition arrangements they may have names like A Song for Mother, Stately Dance, Dancing Ballerinas, Floral Orchestra etc. (OHNO 1990).

Ikebana is expressive art, but the expression has to be interpreted, not only by the intellect but by immanent senses, feelings. Its aesthetics touches deeply the spiritual in man and nature. *Ikebana* is poetic art in a profound sense, it conveys the emotions of the person making the arrangement in a sublimated and symbolic form, not of words, but of the language of natural things. *Ikebana* arrangement is poetry in its fullest and richest sense, subtle communication from nature to person, from person to person, from person to nature.

The Japanese have special aesthetic concepts for judging or describing the experience aroused by an art work. These concepts apply to *ikebana* as well as to other arts. Here are a few examples:

Mono no aware: deep feeling over things; knowing the heart of things; deep, emphatic appreciation of the ephemeral beauty manifest in nature and human life, essence of things that move profoundly the heart; elegant beauty, gentle melancholy, pathos, sorrow or grief; focus on the beauty of impermanence and on the sensitive heart capable of appreciating beauty.

Wabi: simple, modest, austere type of beauty attached to the aesthetics of tea art; richness in poverty; serene, transcendental frame of mind; absence of apparent beauty turned into a new and

higher form of beauty; refined, elegant and tranquil simplicity; beauty in natural materials, forms, colours and textures.

Yojo: excess of feeling; a sentiment or sentiments evoked but not overtly expressed; overtone, reference to meanings which a poem or a work of art obliquely implies in addition to the stated message; in waka poetry, in particular, features of rich symbolism, subtle allusions, exquisite imagery and cryptic diction; lingering feelings over things “behind” (various sources).

Through *ikebana* one can realize the philosophy of “see beauty in Nature, cultivate elegance in Spirit” (SERVOMAA 1999).

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