

# “Unbeaten by Rain”

## A Few Thoughts on Kenji Miyazawa's Acclaimed Poem

By Nao HARADA

Photo: Nao Harada



I think many *Japan SPOTLIGHT* readers know of the Japanese poet and children's book writer named Kenji Miyazawa. Last year, I became the mother of a baby boy and I have since been wondering, admittedly a few years too early, what kinds of books I should introduce to my son when the time comes for him to start reading. The first books that come to my mind are Miyazawa's nursery tales. I still remember how his beloved works, like “*Gorsch the*

*Cellist*,” “*The Restaurant of Many Orders*” and “*Night on the Milky Way Train*,” mesmerized me when I was in primary school and pushed me to forge ahead with reading.

Miyazawa was active in the first half of the last century. A native of Iwate Prefecture in northeastern Japan, where the climate is harsh and winter is bitterly cold, the young writer became a local high school teacher and was known for his sympathy for the plight of poor, struggling farmers. He did not live long; he died in his 30s.

Recently, I have fallen in love with Miyazawa's poetry. His works are well acclaimed outside Japan and have been translated into various languages. His most well-known poem, undoubtedly, is “*Unbeaten by Rain*,” which I am going to share with you.

The English version I am using was translated by Japanese journalist Jerry “Kosuke” Matsumura with the help of many Americans who have taken up the lobby of translating Miyazawa's works. As I am not an expert on the English language, I am in no position to comment on the proficiency of Matsumura's work. However, I do feel his version resonates beautifully with the Japanese original. Many *Japan SPOTLIGHT* readers may be familiar with this poem, but for the benefit of those who are not, Matsumura's translated version of “*Unbeaten by Rain*” is shown on the right.

Why do I find “*Unbeaten by Rain*” such a gem? Firstly, Miyazawa gives us his vision of the selfless man, totally untouched by greed and self-interest. The poem makes me think about the recent global financial crisis. Intellectually challenged in economic matters as I am, news reports have convinced me that human avarice has been responsible for plunging the world into economic doldrums. Do not take me wrong: I do not think our capitalist economy is all evil. After all, most of us earn decent incomes from work and lead decent lives. But increasingly there is this pervasive idea in our society that “anything goes, as long as it benefits me.” Such mentality has made it hard for many to survive in their struggle. It has also produced a system whereby the successful few reap enormous economic bene-

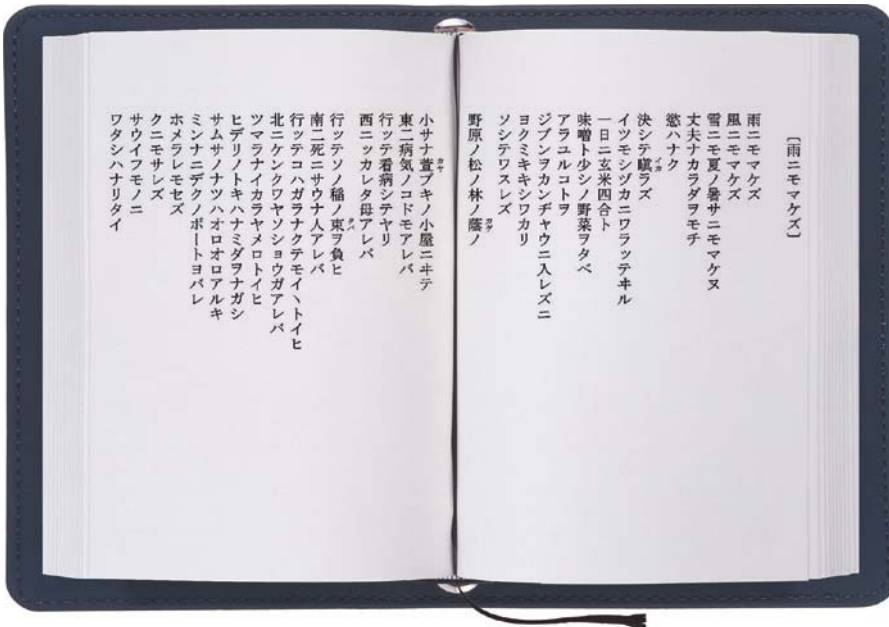
### *Unbeaten by Rain*

*Unbeaten by rain  
Unbeaten by wind  
Neither by the snow nor the summer heat  
Having a healthy body  
Freed from greed  
Never getting angry  
Always smiling quietly  
Having four cups of brown rice a day  
With miso and a small amount of vegetables  
Doing all things  
Without calculating selfish ego  
Seeing, asking, and understanding these things well  
And not forgetting  
In the shadow of the pine forest in the field  
Living in a small thatched house  
If there is a sick child in the east  
Go and take care of him  
If there is an exhausted mother in the west  
Go and carry a bunch of rice stalks for her  
If there is a man near death in the south  
Go and tell him not to be afraid  
And goes to ask “Why don't you stop  
Your argument and make up?”  
Of the quarreling persons  
In the north,  
Shedding tears on a scorching day  
Walking with worry on a cool summer day  
And is called a country bumpkin by all,  
Who can be neither praised nor disparaged,  
I would like to be a person such as that one*

(Translated by Jerry Matsumura)

fits for themselves while impoverishing the rest of their fellow citizens. Eventually, even the successful few get caught in a speculative tailspin. The bubble bursts, ruining the perpetrators and dragging the rest of the world down as well in a chain reaction.

Reading “*Unbeaten by Rain*” gives us a respite from such brutal reality. Miyazawa has created for us an entirely different world, even an entirely different breed of man: a perfect human being “freed from greed, never getting angry, always smiling gently.” Unlike the rest of us, Miyazawa's hero does not seek recognition and affirmation from



Japanese version of "Unbeaten by Rain" (left) and poet Kenji Miyazawa: He reportedly scribbled the poem on his tiny notebook while sick in bed.

others. He is content to be "called a country bumpkin by all, who can be neither praised nor disparaged." What is more, by declaring that "I would like to be a person such as that one," Miyazawa is telling us that the pursuit of self-interest and greed is not the path to human happiness.

Secondly, I think "Unbeaten by Rain" highlights the Buddhist ideal of the negation of the self. I say Buddhist because Miyazawa is known to have been a devout follower of Buddhism. In modern society, many of the so-called "faithful" are actually looking for good luck in their choice of a particular faith. But it is hardly erudite to think that the Almighty only rewards the faithful. In life, Jesus was not unlike the "country bumpkin" in "Unbeaten by Rain": he was persecuted and helpless. Still, the man portrayed by the poet is full of infinite love for mankind.

In creating the hero of "Unbeaten by Rain," Miyazawa seems to be saying the love of the Almighty is ultimately this unending concern. Perhaps it is not possible to render specific assistance for the unfortunate and the weak. The love of God is to stand by their side, to be there and to share their misery and pain. By contrast, our modern society is becoming too callous toward the misery of others. Such apathy would very likely lead to our very own descent into misfortune.

As I mentioned at the beginning, I became a proud mother last year. Of course, I love my son very much, but there is no denying that this parental love is nothing but an altered form of self-love. I know I am blessed to have someone I love more than myself. Yet, this source of happiness is very personal and almost selfish. Reading "Unbeaten by Rain" has given me a new perspective. It makes me question anew the meaning of life and existence. Our existence can only make sense when we love and care about fellow countrymen. The poem seems to tell us this love is the ultimate source of happiness, the reason for our very existence.

Finally, I think gems like "Unbeaten by Rain" are part of the Japanese cultural heritage that we should share proudly with the rest of the world. One mission of this magazine is to promote the understanding of Japanese business and economic developments. Perhaps, in addition, it may be a good idea to venture into the sphere

of introducing Japanese cultural heritage. Miyazawa's poem is a good example.

According to a friend of mine who lived abroad for many years, foreigners are keen to know about the Japanese spirit, what the Japanese value most in our cultural tradition. It is a sort of cultural identity, if put into difficult words. The 18th-century Edo-era scholar Motoori Norinaga put it this way: "If someone asks about the Yamato (Japanese) spirit, it is mountain cherry blossoms, fragrant in the morning sun." As we see in this *tanka* (31-syllable poetry), the transient beauty of cherry blossoms that captures the unique Japanese love of unsoiled existence is regarded as something typifying Japanese identity.

During the Meiji period (1868-1912), Japanese scholars made valiant attempts to present what they believed to be the essence of the Japanese spirit. Among such works are Kanzo Uchimura's "Japan and Japanese" (or "Representative Men of Japan" in a later edition), Kakuzo Okakura's "The Book of Tea" and Inazo Nitobe's "Bushido: The Soul of Japan," all three of them written in English.

Interestingly, some friends of mine tell their foreign friends that *bushido* is the essence of the Japanese identity. But women like me find *bushido* a very difficult concept to identify with. Personally, I prefer the view presented by Miyazawa in "Unbeaten by Rain," which I believe portrays the heart of the real Japanese. After all, the Japanese are a people who genuinely value kindness and thoughtfulness toward countrymen, though many of us might have now forgotten the national traits.

I think many *Japan SPOTLIGHT* readers share Christian culture. The Bible says, "Man does not live by bread alone." I believe Miyazawa's poem resonates with this Christian teaching. What do you think?

Before I conclude, I would like to pay my respects to Matsumura for his beautiful rendition of "Unbeaten by Rain." A great job done, indeed. **JS**

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