

Monday, October 6, 2008

Mu: The power of nothingness.

The Chinese script for the character "mu," which means nothing. Why are so many intricate brush strokes needed to convey nothing? (The copyright was relinquished by this animated symbol's creator. The symbol also is available here.) At first blush -- at least from a traditional Western perspective -- irony would be apparent in the concept that nothingness can be powerful. However, I already know about the t'ai chi power of emptying one's mind, emptying one's leg as if a person is only standing on the remaining substantial leg, and not chasing the opponent's strength and energy. I also know about the power of being in trial with no baggage and to handle what is immediately at hand, in the now -- in the zone as my brother lawyer Mark Bennett calls it -- and being at once relaxed and powerful to take on any opportunity, apparent threat, or otherwise stressful situation. Furthermore, I know the power of overcoming fear by redefining life as being here now, with no coming nor going, no chasing nor being chased, no increase nor decrease, with a goal towards no fear even of injury and death, but instead being here now. Around fifteen years ago in the video store, my attention was drawn to Wim Wenders' Tokyo-ga. Seven years earlier, I spent two weeks in Tokyo on business, at once fascinated by the Buddhist and Shinto aspects of the culture and at the same time very clueless about the two. I focused instead on arriving early each morning at the bank I was auditing with my small team from Wall Street's Irving Trust Company that owned the bank, and spending some evening and weekend free time taking in the sights and sounds of the country. Nine years ago, I returned to Japan, this time on vacation, having started grooving on Nichiren Buddhism, and finding a Nipponzan Myohoji Nichiren temple in Osaka only after making several inquiries and finally being driven there by a man from the small market where I had bought some grapefruits for the temple, after having stayed for two days in Tokyo with a very kind and interesting family that follows the Nipponzan Myohoji path. Tokyo-ga is Wenders' tribute to, search for, and immersion in giant filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu (see one of his clips.) How curious that as I unsuccessfully did a YouTube search for the Wenders film that includes a botched-from-the-beginning store robbery by a man who has just been forced out of his home, I instead found a scene from Tokyo-ga that visits Ozu's gravesite. Instead of saying Ozu's name, his headstone has the above-displayed symbol "mu" (see this photo of his headstone, too), which I understand can be defined -- perhaps very imperfectly defined -- as "nothing". Here are clips from Tokyo-ga, in serial order: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and ten. What did Ozu mean by having his headstone say "mu"? Was this how he viewed the afterlife? As nothing? Was it a stunt to keep people thinking even after he departed this world? Was he a Buddhist, seeing that at least the Lotus Sutra -- which is particularly followed by Nichiren Buddhists -- focuses heavily on nothingness, including no attachment to one's body or ego, and no attachment to the suffering inherent with birth, sickness, old age and death? (See this essay on one of the people who was apparently instrumental in driving the foregoing updated 1971 translation of the threefold Lotus Sutra.) The senses of cinema webpage says: "Whilst in China during his war service, Ozu asked a Chinese monk to paint the character 'mu' for him (an abstract concept loosely meaning 'void' or 'nothingness'). Ozu died painfully on his sixtieth birthday in 1963 of cancer and his tombstone in the temple of Engaku in Kita-Kamakura bears the inscription 'mu' from the monk's painting that he had kept all his life." Using "mu" on the Western side is Douglas Hofstadter, in Gödel, Escher, Bach. What to do with all this mu? We can learn much from it. Jon Katz

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 00:00