

Santōka: Taking a Second Look

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I can't give up sakè;
The budding trees,
The budding grasses.

Verse 242, from *Mountain Tasting, Zen Haiku* by Santōka Taneda¹

I almost passed up this poem in John Stevens's venerable collection of Santōka's work, as one often does when nothing much seems to connect. Then I stopped myself. If the haiku were so prosaic and inconsequential, why would Stevens have bothered to include it? He had a plethora of the poet's verses from which to choose, and yet he chose to include this haiku.

The question is why?

A little background may lend some insight. To begin, Santōka is honored today as a great Zen master as well as a great haiku poet who chose the life of a beggar priest. In his day, however, Santōka Taneda alienated many of his literary contemporaries who scorned him because of his disruptive behavior incited by his intemperate consumption of sakè. However, since his death in 1940 at the age of fifty-eight, his poetic reputation has soared. Among lay people, poets, and scholars East and West he is respected for his Zen haiku with its focus on the unadorned, straightforward, and impermanent. While these qualities can be found in all true Zen haiku, they are not mere conventions with Santōka. In contrast to the popular poetry that was being written by the majority of his peers, his haiku were not dalliances. They mirrored a life of eccentricities, vulnerabilities, and excessive drinking. Thus, in all ways, it is virtually impossible to separate the man from his poetry.

Long before undertaking his mendicant Zen pilgrimages, Santōka's life was plagued with tragedies that left him bruised

with multiple heartaches. His young mother committed suicide. The sight of her corpse being lifted from the well of their home left a deep scar in his ten-year-old psyche. In his early twenties he was already smitten with sakè and had become its slave. In his late thirties, the marriage to his one and only wife failed. He was unsuccessful in business after business. High-strung by nature, he struggled with several mental breakdowns and attempted suicides, the most dramatic being the day he stood on the railroad tracks of an oncoming train. Fortunately, the conductor saw him and was able to stop the train before it killed Santōka. Following this attempted suicide, he found shelter in a nearby Zen temple. In its sanctity, he refocused his life and became an ordained Zen priest.

By the time he was forty-three, he chose to leave monastic life as well as the acolytes who were half his age and devote himself exclusively to a life without material and emotional commitments. While walking the countryside with his begging bowl and writing tablet, he recorded his journey in prose, as well as in haiku, a poetic form that had become an integral part of his spiritual diary. During this period, he wrote 242. Knowing this about him, I was challenged by 242 and how to interpret it. Not only disjunctive, it reads like a wounded man's cry.

By nature sensitive as a leaf on a tree in the wind, and as fragile, he cries, "I can't give up sakè." He doesn't say he won't give up the powerful rice wine, or even that he wants to give it up, he says, "I can't." Can't? Why not? Clearly, Santōka suffered from alcoholism, a chronic, debilitating disease. The fact is that Santōka didn't consider the potent wine his nemesis or undoing. It was as essential to him as the air he breathed, a holy substance. He wrote in his diary

Sakè for the body, haiku for the heart;
Sakè is the haiku of the body,
Haiku is the sakè of the heart.²

But what does Santōka's love of sakè have to do with the budding of early spring? Therein lies the key. Sakè makes him

feel renewed, alive. Lines 2 and 3 tell us that it is the time of year when branches still look naked and the fields look sere. Yet energy is ready to explode into the bright greens of new leaves and fields. It is still too early for the myriad perfumes and abundant blossoms that will come later. Right now, though, winter is retreating, and spring power pushes, ready to burst open and fill the trees and fields with the dance of life. But Santōka, a middle-aged man in the midst of this nascent awakening, is not dancing, not without his cherished wine.

Day after day and year after year without family or friends as traveling companions to undergird him, Santōka walked the coastline into the mountains and through the countryside, free of all worldly encumbrance and attachments. That is not to say he did not have friends. He did. He often met up with them when stopping for an evening in their villages to share poetry, and, of course, drink the fermented rice wine. If he did stay for a few days with this friend or that, he soon grew restless and left, driven to resume his spiritual journey. His commitment was to the way of Zen, the begging bowl, and writing haiku. His intention was clear: live in the present moment and eschew bonds with people or anything that restricted his spiritual path.

Simply clothed in a robe, straw sandals, and a large straw hat to shield him as much as possible from the harsh elements, he traveled on foot every day ten miles or so with his walking stick and begging bowl until he gathered just enough coins—no more, no less—to pay for the cheapest of inns where he could buy a simple meal and some rice wine before settling in to write his haiku verses and musings of the day. Mornings, he bathed and had a meager breakfast before resuming his journey to rid himself of self with all its judgments of good and bad, true or false. His goal was to be free as the wind, clouds, or running water, an absolute goal impossible to attain, but one he pursued to the end of his life.

Being a true intuitive, Santōka says, “Clear or cloudy I compose each verse in a state of body and mind cast off.”³ He used everyday language when writing his haiku, no allusions, no traditional form, only simple and transparent lines. What he

saw and experienced he wrote down. The rice wine appears to mitigate his loneliness and emotional pain caused by all the failures in his life. This haiku encapsulates his state of mind, recognizing the tension of opposites that coexist in his world. Had he tried to analyze the complexity of his life and then compose his haiku, he would never have written these three short lines, for they come from this instinctive inner source rather than a rational one. Not only do we see the landscape, we feel winter versus spring and the feebleness of age versus the energy of youth—or that which pushes against restraint like an active volcano soon to break free of dormancy and erupt in unrestrained flow—or as he states it, in the budding of trees and grasses. The acknowledgement of his life in the midst of a world awakening to the blood pulse of spring imbues 242 with power.

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The budding trees,
The budding grasses.

Notes

1. *Mountain Tasting: Zen Haiku* by Santōka Taneda, translated and introduced by John Stevens (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill Press, 1980), 92.
2. *Ibid.*, 26.
3. *Ibid.*, 25.



Marian Olson is a nonfiction writer and poet. She has been publishing haiku since 1979 and is the author of seven books of poetry, including Songs of the Chicken Yard, a critically acclaimed book of haiku and senryu. Desert Hours won first place in the Haiku Society of America Merit Books Awards for 2008, as well as being a finalist in the 2008 New Mexico Book Awards. Consider This placed first in the 2011 free verse Snapshot E-book competition. Moondance is her latest book of haiku poetry. Forthcoming in 2014, Kaleidoscope will be her first book of tanka.