

Bolstering Zōka Awareness by Janice Doppler

Matsuo Bashō's involvement with Zen Buddhism is well known, but that is only part of the picture. Like most haikai poets of his time, Bashō valued Buddhist, Daoist, Confucian, and Neo-Confucian philosophy that had spread from China to Japan during the Heian Period (794-1185). Chan Buddhism (Zen in Japanese) was the product of a blend of Buddhism from India with Chinese Daoism. Neo-Confucian scholars melded Confucian and Daoist philosophy to refine the concept of *cheng* (*makoto* in Japanese) and connected it with the Natural which is similar to *zōka*. The concept of *zōka* first appeared in the *Zhuangzi*, a Daoist wisdom text written at about the time of Aristotle and Socrates in ancient Greece.

In the opening passage of Bashō's travel journal *Knapsack Notebook* (*Oi No Kobumi*, 1687), he encouraged poets to "follow *zōka*." The intent of this essay is to bolster *zōka* awareness^[1]. It explores what *zōka* is from the perspective of ancient sages and Neo-Confucian scholars and proposes using poetic spirit as a vehicle for perceiving and communicating *zōka*. It explores possibilities for following *zōka* through *makoto* (sincerity or truthfulness) as understood by Matsuo Bashō, Ueshima Onitsura, and Masaoka Shiki. It offers the views of twentieth-century haiku poet Ogiwara Seisensui as evidence of the relevance of *zōka* to modern haiku poets.

There is no equivalent for *zōka* in English so many westerners have never heard of it. Paradoxically, the dynamism of *zōka* can be intuited even if a poet is unaware it exists and many haiku poets have been unintentionally following it. Some might ask why bother with *zōka* if it can be intuited anyway. Could *zōka* awareness open a deeper, more enriching experience of nature? Can interpreting centuries old philosophy and poetics through the filter of our personal beliefs and experiences be a springboard

to fresh haiku?

What is Zōka?

Ancient sages who sought to understand the universe developed a cosmology that describes the never-ending interactions of two generative energies. One fuels the process of never-ending cyclical transformations of birth, growth, maturation, and death in the universe. The other condenses into things that can be experienced. These energies function simultaneously and cannot exist without the other. Yet, each retains its own qualities and characteristics. The combination of these energies is called *zōka* in Japanese and *zaohua* in Chinese.

By Bashō's time, this philosophy had evolved to the Neo-Confucian understanding that a formless mix of the *Dao* separated into two energies. This is illustrated by the familiar yin/yang symbol. Imagine this flat symbol as a sphere containing a formless mix of light and dark molecules. The light "fish" is yang energy, dark is yin energy. The small dark circle in the light fish is a bit of yin in yang; the small light circle in the dark fish is a bit of yang in yin. Tensions between fish and circles generate movement. Something mysterious happens and bits of light and dark spontaneously take form. Whatever initially causes the movement shapes things from itself. They exist for a while then sink back into the formlessness within the sphere. This Neo-Confucian metaphor illustrates how *zōka* works.

Western scholars describe *zōka* in varied ways such as ... an unpredictable force of nature that constructs and deconstructs all objects ... nature's tendency and ability to continuously self-transform ... the mysterious process that brings aspects of the cosmos into being ... a synthesis of the workings of the *Dao*/the Way in which everything is perpetually emerging, transforming, and returning to its source. Each of these descriptions partially describes *zōka*. Perhaps it is comparable to the Force in *Star Wars* movies.

The term *zōka* doesn't translate directly into English and translators have varied interpretations. It's often loosely translated as nature; however, for Westerners that conjures the notion of a collection of plants and animals in a forest, desert, ocean coastline, or elsewhere. A translation used in my previous writings, the Creative, was utilized by multiple scholars[ii]. In the next section, we'll dive into the work of Makoto Ueda who translates it differently. Following *zōka*, regardless of how it is translated, is following the movement and rhythms of the natural world and finding inspiration for poetry, art, and more.

Zōka as Poetic Spirit

In his essay *Bashō and the Poetics of Haiku*, Ueda translated Bashō's "follow *zōka*" passage as:

There is one common element which permeates Saigyō's thirty-one-syllable poetry, Sōgi's linked verse, Sesshū's brush painting, and Rikyū's tea ceremony. It is the poetic spirit, through which man follows the creative energy of nature and makes communion with the things of the four seasons. For those who understand the spirit, everything they see becomes a lovely flower, and everything they imagine becomes a beautiful moon. Those who do not see the flower are no different from barbarians; those who do not imagine the flower are no different from beasts. Detach yourself from barbarians and beasts; follow the creative energy and return to nature.

In this translation, a common element runs through the arts of masters who embodied poetic spirit. Saigyō was Japan's greatest *waka* poet and Sōgi's poetry raised linked verse to a status nearly equal to *waka*. Sesshū studied landscape painting in China and incorporated the poetic spirit that he sensed as the underlying

vitality of that style. Rikyū's tea ceremony served as a vehicle for briefly escaping the cares of daily life and calming one's inner spirit. Bashō is credited with raising haiku to the level of other arts by naming these masters.

In his essay, Ueda translates *zōka* as "creative energy" and equates it with poetic spirit that is a unifying force underlying art and culture. He describes this energy as "transpersonal" in that it is beyond the emotions of people. Since humans are part of the universe, this energy flows within each of us and is the source of our creativity. Ueda proposed three principles that intertwine poetic spirit with transpersonal energy: 1) Poetic spirit is nurtured by seeking beauty. 2) Transpersonal creative energy flows through everything in the cosmos and manifests as beauty in nature. 3) Transpersonal creative energy can be intuited through aesthetics and expressed via poetic techniques. If considered in terms of the yin/yang symbol, perhaps transpersonal energy is the light fish and personal energy the dark fish; the dark circle in the light fish is our creative impulse and the light circle is what manifests from our creativity.

Seeking beauty in the natural world and, ideally, losing oneself in it is an aspect of the first two principles. The loss of oneself in nature is a connection with the transpersonal energy that flows through everything including humans. Transpersonal energy is the source of our creativity and art is at its best when it flows from transpersonal energy rather than the conscious will, emotions, and desires that are unique to each of us. For the third principle, if transpersonal creative energy can be intuited through aesthetics, how can we cultivate a) poetic spirit by using our physical senses to experience beauty that is visible and b) aesthetic sensitivity for intuiting what is beyond what is visible?

In a nutshell, poetic spirit is an aesthetic attitude cultivated by communing with nature to open to the creative energy of the universe. The more that spirit is cultivated, the more sensitive one's spirit becomes and awareness of what is magical in the

world is more likely.

The big question is how does poetic spirit express what it intuit? Of course, commonly used poetic techniques and pursuing aesthetic ideals such as *yūgen*, *sabi*, *wabi*, or *karumi* are important ways. Another is infrequently discussed - seeking *makoto*. *Makoto* is not *zōka*, yet both are within the realm of poetic spirit. What is *makoto*? How does it connect with poetic spirit? With *zōka*? What did Bashō, his contemporary Onitsura, and Shiki say about *makoto*?

Makoto

Makoto can be translated as sincerity or truthfulness - sincerity as in a quality of naturalness and simplicity rather than sincerity as in earnestness. In haiku, *makoto* is sincerity when communicating emotions or sensations that emerge during a moment of experience. Miniscule moments such as noticing the twitch of a deer's ear, a fragrance on the breeze, the taste of wild strawberries. Large moments such as witnessing autumn foliage, the breach of a whale, or lightning flashes. It is seeing, hearing, tasting with the spirit eye, ear, or tongue.

Onitsura, Bashō, and Sincerity

Bashō (1644-1694), Onitsura (1661-1783), and many of their contemporaries believed the sincerity of art and the sincerity of heaven and earth were unified in the best poetry. Their beliefs were rooted in a Confucian text, *Doctrine of the Mean*, which declared that “without sincerity (*cheng* in Chinese, *makoto* in Japanese) there would be nothing.” Another passage stated “Sincerity is the Way of Heaven. The attainment of sincerity is the Way of Man.” More than a thousand years later, Neo-Confucian scholars merged Confucian ethics with Daoist philosophy. Sincerity was linked to “the Natural” - a universal principle that integrated the workings of heaven and earth as described in the Zhuangzi and Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching). Aesthetic appreciation of the beauty of the natural world was expected. Poetry commonly had images of “nature’s working,” which is a rough translation of *zōka*.

The evolution of these concepts is much more complicated than this snapshot. What is important here is that there is a centuries-old connection between sincerity, the Natural, and *zōka*; all were popular in haikai at the time of Bashō and Onitsura. Onitsura focused on practical applications of sincerity. Bashō emphasized *sabi* and *karumi* with sincerity playing a lesser, yet important, role.

Ueshima Onitsura

Like Bashō, Onitsura studied in the Teimon and Danrin haikai schools. At age twenty-five, he withdrew from the haiku community and embarked on a five-year search for deeper meaning in poetry. He became convinced that sincerity was the basic principle for all good poetry. He taught that communicating sincerity was achieved via embodiment of heaven and earth through truthful manifestation of art. His most famous insight is “There is no haikai without *makoto*.” Onitsura[iii] explained:

Poets who have not yet set their hearts on following the Way of *makoto* and content themselves with exploring only the most superficial aspects of composing verse will never derive any benefit from haikai, no matter how many years they claim to practice.

Onitsura is not well-known in the western haiku community; however, his book Soliloquy (*Hitorigoto*), written at the urging of his students, contributed significantly to haikai being recognized as a serious literary genre. Instead of defining sincerity, Onitsura described its characteristics: a way of developing poetic skills via diligent practice, a quality expressed from the heart rather than clever words, and a quality that transcends time and changing styles. Here is how he explained this last quality:

What today is considered old style no doubt at one time was regarded as contemporary style. And what today is considered contemporary style will one day be regarded as old style. Whether the verse is considered old style or contemporary style makes no difference. It all depends on the imagery of the verses that the poet wishes to compose. Even if they are designated as 'old style' or 'new style', the verses of a poet who has earnestly practiced the Way of *makoto* will not seem outdated, no matter how many years have passed since they were written.

Onitsura's work, and that of Bashō, was grounded in the belief that sincerity and the Natural were closely related and were fundamental when composing haikai. Scholars have concluded that Bashō studied more deeply and broadly than Onitsura so he was able to develop a more nuanced approach.

Matsuo Bashō

As we saw earlier in the passage from *Knapsack Notebook*, Bashō proposed that the poetic spirit which threads through all poets is an aspect of following creative energy, following *zōka*. It involves appreciating the beauty of the natural world as well as perceiving the workings of the cosmos - *zōka*, *zaohua*, Dao, the Way, the Natural, transpersonal energy, etc. In addition, following *zōka* is deepened by cultivating poetic spirit in which intuitive perception and contemplation enable the naturalness of experiences to emerge from poets' inner depth.

Although not as well-known as Bashō's aesthetics of *sabi* and *karumi*, *makoto* played an important role in his work and teachings. Bashō deepened the basic notion of *makoto* in two ways. First, he added *fūga* (elegance or refinement) to *makoto* (sincerity). *Fūga no makoto* equates the sincerity of poetry with doing one's best to create poetic elegance. Second, he linked *fūga no makoto* with *fueki ryūkō* (unchanging and everchanging). According to the writings of some of Bashō's disciples, both concepts were frequently discussed as aspects of poetic spirit after Bashō returned from his journey that resulted in *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.

Fueki refers to poetic qualities that remain unchanged across centuries. *Ryūkō* seeks renewal and change within a relatively short time. Universal, unchanging qualities (*fueki*) as well as ever-changing stylistic changes (*ryūkō*) were necessary for sincerity of poetry (*fūga no makoto*) in haikai. In his *Three Books (Sanzōshi)*, Bashō's disciple Hattori Dohō (1657-1730), summarized Shōmon school theory about these concepts. As translated by Peipei Qiu, he explained:

In the poetry of the Master, there is something that remains constant for thousands of generations, and something that always changes. These two, in the final analysis, share one principle. This principle is the sin-

cerity of poetry (*fūga no makoto*). If one does not know what the "constant" is, one hasn't apprehended this sincerity. The constant refers to a style based firmly on sincerity; it does not depend on old or new styles, nor can it be altered by changes and fashions. Look at poems of different generations. Each generation had its own fashion. Yet, whether old or new, many poems show that the emotional experiences we have today have not changed from those of the ancients. This is the "constant" one should first put in mind. On the other hand, it is the principle of the Natural that everything goes through innumerable changes and transformations. If haikai does not follow the change, it cannot renew its style: not to follow the change means to stick only to a transitory fashion or gain temporary popularity, since it does not seek the sincerity of poetry. Those who are not determined to pursue the sincerity of poetry can never grasp its changes; they merely follow behind in the footsteps of others. Those who pursue sincerity never stop at where they have arrived; they naturally take a further step forward. No matter how many changes and varieties haikai may have in the future, changes that are based on sincerity belong to the Master's poetic tradition. Don't ever lick the dregs of the ancients. Things constantly renew themselves as the shifting of the four seasons, and we can say that this is true of everything.

In a nutshell, Bashō advocated for sincerity of poetry (*fūga no makoto*) that incorporates what is unchanging and the everchanging (*fueki ryūkō*). Each poet's personal style changes as skill and aesthetic sensitivity build over time. In addition, changes in what style is popular shift over time. Although the emotional responses of today's poets are similar to those of our poet ancestors, how we express our response differs because we

each have our unique personal response and social conditioning. For example, if two poets who live centuries apart witness an insect struggling to escape a spider's web, both are likely to experience similar emotions; however, each will express that differently in haiku. Given Dohō's explanation, if a modern poet expresses the universal human emotions triggered by this experience and does so in his or her unique way, then the haiku is fresh.

Masaoka Shiki

You may be familiar with *makoto* as the last of Shiki's stages of development of a poet as described in Lee Gurga's book, *A Poet's Guide*: "sketch from life" (*shasei*) for beginners, "selective realism" for more advanced poets and "truthfulness" (*makoto*) for masters. Sketching from life is observing nature and recording what was observed. Selective realism is selecting what is meaningful enough to write about while sketching from life. Master poets combine imagination with selective realism to achieve truthfulness (*makoto*) in which old subjects are seen in new perspectives that communicate the poet's inner truth. Gurga states that each stage must be mastered before moving to the next.

Ueda devoted a chapter to Shiki in his book *Modern Japanese Poets and the Nature of Literature*. Much is similar to Gurga's work; however, Ueda posits three types of sketching from life rather than stages: simple *shasei*, selective realism^[iv], and truthfulness. Ueda describes the most refined *shasei*, truthfulness or sincerity (*makoto*), as blending direct observation with imaginative creation with the poet being truthful to personal wishes and ideals. Ueda concluded that, to Shiki, *makoto* was "*shasei* directed toward internal reality. It is based on the same principle of direct observation, except that the object to be observed is the poet's own self. The poet is to experience his inner life as simply and

sincerely as he is to observe nature.”

So, Shiki’s understanding of *makoto* focused on the poet’s inner life or personal wishes and ideals while Bashō and Onitsura valued a poetic spirit that yearns to lose itself in the Creative. In spite of the wide difference between Shiki and the much earlier poets, is there something of value in both ends of the apparent *makoto* spectrum? Is there something of value for contemporary poets in the views of Bashō and Onitsura on poetic spirit, sincerity, and *zōka*? We’ll turn to Seisensui (1884-1976) for a relatively modern viewpoint.

Poetic Spirit, Sincerity, and Zōka for Contemporary Haiku

Seisensui (1884-1976), a leader of the free-style haiku movement in twentieth-century Japan, advocated abandoning the 17-syllable and 5-7-5 patterns and criticized tying season words to traditional associations. He co-founded *Layered Clouds*, a magazine dedicated to free-verse haiku; however, he believed that free verse was haiku-like only if it maintained Bashō’s poetic spirit. He repeatedly quoted Bashō’s advice to “follow nature and return to nature”^[v] which he interpreted as submerging ego within nature and feeling its pulse within one’s body.

Seisensui frequently wrote about aspects of poetic spirit from pre-modern poetry that remained important to him: naturalness and simplicity. For him, naturalness fosters a mind able to transcend ego and align with the life of nature and natural forces. He said:

The word “naturalness” can be interpreted in many ways, but I believe its true meaning has to do with one’s perception of the force of life. Naturalness does not imply a retreat from society into nature. It does not refer just to viewing the moon or the clouds. Rather, it asks one to absorb the great power and light possessed by nature and to hold the happiness of nature in one’s heart during

the course of one's life.

Simplicity was rooted in his perception that nature is simple, beauty is simple. Like naturalness, simplicity is a manifestation of the dynamic force of nature. According to Seisensui:

Simplicity does not mean something passive, something done on a reduced scale. It works on complex, multifarious, disorderly things until it finds a core and unifies them into a single entity. Only something that has strength can do this. It is the same with man's mind: when the mind is unified by a single powerful purpose - for instance, admiration of the great power of nature - it becomes extremely simple.

In the preface to his *How to Write and Appreciate Haiku*, Seisensui described three pleasures of writing and reading haiku - creating, appreciating, and seeing. Humans instinctively experience joy when creating and composing haiku. Creating can be a cathartic pleasure that relieves emotional pain when writing a poem. The pleasure of appreciating haiku is shared by poets who take pleasure in writing about an experience and readers who enjoy imagining it.

The pleasure of seeing is related to but goes beyond experiencing the beauty of nature. Seeking beauty cultivates the sensitivity to notice what others are likely to miss. It fosters a haiku mind able to transcend ego to become part of something larger, something cosmic. Seisensui believed haiku was a way of life with two aims - the aesthetic aim of creating art and the moral aim of living a spiritually rich life. For him, the pleasure of seeing was equivalent to the spiritual ecstasy of becoming lost in the act of experiencing nature. Seisensui declared:

Everyone can see and enjoy the beauty of flowers and

blossoms. But between those who know haiku, and those who do not there is a difference. When people are awakened to haiku, they begin noticing the beauty of nature, in such unlikely things as a weed or fallen leaves, the kind of things that they would have wanted to throw away before their awakening. ... Basho said, 'everything we see is a flower.' A stone by the roadside or a cobweb under the eaves is just as beautiful as a flower. Living in this world will become very enjoyable if one acquires such a viewpoint. One could be awakened to this viewpoint by way of Buddhism, but that requires an exceedingly hard training. There is an easier, more enjoyable route: haiku.

Onitsura, Bashō, and Seisensui valued the principles of following *zōka*, opening poetic spirit, and incorporating sincerity. How do you experience poetic spirit and how does it contribute emotional power to your haiku? What does sincerity mean to you? How can sincerity integrated with *zōka* awareness inspire your poetic spirit? Do you wish it to do so? Answers that fit within your perspectives, experiences, and views are your way of following *zōka*. It is the only way that is important to understand.

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Notes

[i] The phrase zōka awareness was coined by Diana Webb in her review of *One Thread: Zōka in Contemporary Haiku* in *Blithe Spirit* 35.1, 2025, page 76.

[ii] Zōka is translated as the Creative by Haruo Shirane, Peipei Qiu, Steven D. Carter, and David Landis Barnhill.

[iii] Onitsura quotes are translated by Cheryl Crowley in “Putting Makoto into Practice: Onitsura’s Hitorigoto,” which is a theoretical essay along with a complete translation of *Soliloquy*. It is available online in the JSTOR database.

[iv] In his essay *Staying with the Moment – Our Western Haiku Tradition*, Brian Tasker states that the term “selective realism” was coined by Makoto Ueda rather than Shiki.

[v] Ueda translates zōka as nature here as well as in Bashō’s “follow zōka” passage earlier in this essay.