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## LIBERATION AS A THEME IN THE HAIKU OF TANEDA SANTOKA

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**Abstract:** This research paper entitled: “LIBERATION AS A THEME IN THE HAIKU OF TANEDA SANTOKA” aims to present the sense of freedom and renunciation through his Haiku which belong to the freestyle school of structuring as compared to the traditional strict method of writing Haiku.

Santoka Taneda was a Japanese wandering monk whose life embodies the Zen spirit in three ways viz. no duplicity, no imitation and simplicity of expression. Capturing fleeting emotions and moments through images and presenting it to others for being perceived in the same way as observed and felt by the composer is the main attribute of ‘Haiku’.

What captivates us in a Haiku is the ‘brevity’ and ‘precision’ of the images used. From the moment a human soul understands the complexities of life, there arises a yearning for ‘liberation’ from the shackles of life. The Haiku of Santoka Taneda provide us a means through which we can perceive a sense of liberation.

**Keywords:** beyonding, brevity, Buddhism, freedom, haiku, liberation, moksha, nirvana, spirituality, wandering monk, Zen.

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a reflection

in water that is  
what a traveler is

Through this striking Haiku, Santoka Taneda, a Japanese walking mendicant contemplates about the transitoriness of human existence. As per this Zen monk, life is nothing more than an image on water, without any permanence.

As defined in the *Handbook of Literary Terms* by M. H. Abrams and G. G. Harpham, Haiku is a Japanese poetic form that represents in seventeen syllables that are ordered into three lines of five, seven and five syllables – the poet’s emotional or spiritual response to a natural object, scene, a season of the year.

A Haiku captures fleeting moments and presents certain deep philosophical truths. It is a recapturing of thoughts through images and objects of the tangible world. A Haiku is captivating by virtue of its ‘brevity’, ‘precision’ and ‘simplicity’.

Santoka’s Haiku are inspired by his Zen philosophy of life. He was perhaps the most famous of the 20<sup>th</sup> century free-style haiku poets. He spent most of his life wandering, drinking and writing haiku.

Taneda Santoka is a very important poet in modern haiku literature, but he is not very well-known within the English language haiku community. Of the 58 years he lived, Taneda spent 16 of them as a mendicant Zen priest.

What is different, however, about Santoka compared to Basho, Issa, Ryokan, or Dogen, is that he did not follow the traditional conventions of the poetic form in which they worked. Santoka was the disciple of Ogiwara Seisensui (1884-1976), the leader of the “free-style school of haiku”. This school of haiku discarded the traditional use of the season

word and the 5-7-5 structure. Instead he opted for a free verse form.

In 1924 the pain from all of his life culminated in his attempting suicide. Most men contemplating suicide would think of quiet and painless ways to end it, but Santoka of course was different; he chose to stand facing an incoming train. This sort of choice represents his strong will that wanted realization at death. The only way to have that was to face it directly, but fate had something else in store for him; the conductor spotted him and brought the train to a screeching halt. He was then brought to a nearby Zen temple where he was invited to stay as long as he liked.

He quickly fell into the rigorous life of a Zen student and in a year he was ordained a Zen priest at the age of 42. It is here with his attempted suicide that his life really began to take on a mythical stature.

The important aspect about Taneda using Zen thought in his haiku is that for him everything is interconnected. So ultimately for him there is no side of nature, it is a cycle, a circle. Thus nothing is unimportant in his circle of nature. His nature was dust, rain, mud, frost biting ice and snow; his trees were bare, cold and scratchy; his plants were weeds or wild grass. These unadorned elements of nature had equal importance just like the aesthetically pleasing cherry blossom or a gentle breeze.

From the moment a man begins to gain knowledge of himself and his surroundings, there arises a deep yearning for a sense of ‘liberation’ which is referred to as ‘Moksha’ in the Hindu Philosophy. In ‘Hinduism’ and Hindu philosophy, ‘Moksha’ refers to various forms of emancipation or liberation which is nothing but release from the cycle of birth and death. In its epistemological and psychological senses, Moksha refers to freedom from ignorance or self-realization and self-knowledge.

The concept of Moksha is found in Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism and other religions. The term 'nirvana' is more common in Buddhism, while 'moksha' is prevalent in Hinduism. The words moksha and nirvana and kaivalya are sometimes used synonymously, because they all refer to the state that liberates a person from all causes of sorrow and suffering.

Taneda wrote about life and some of the hard realities he had to face. It is not that the old masters did not face hardships in life; it is just that few chose to express them to such a degree as Taneda did.

Ox straining  
Under a heavy load  
Its bell goes tinkle-tinkle

Explaining this haiku, Taneda speaks as follows in the translated book about him entitled *For All My Walking* by Burton Watson:

This poem expresses the way I feel about the oxen in this area. I hear the bell go tinkle-tinkle and feel happy. Then I see the load the Ox is carrying and feel sad.

The above haiku is about the burden of life being borne by the soul, which is not entirely without music of its own.

Charlie Lutes has rightly defined liberation in his essay "What is Liberation?"

The deliverance of the human from his self-created bondage, the glory of that which is beyond all grasp of thought, the happiness that is the very foundation of our existence, is nearer to us than anything of a physical nature.

Santoka Taneda's following haiku is pertinent in this context :

nice road  
going to a nice building  
crematorium

As per the Zen philosophy on which Santoka Taneda's life was based, wisdom and compassion are like the two wings of a bird, you need both to fly.

In our ignorance we think that anger and greed are caused by the so called outside world, by the other and in desperation, we seek liberation from our suffering in the outside world, in the other, if needed then resorting to violence.

In short, we think liberation is possible only if some conditions are fulfilled.

"All is one, and one is all."

This is what Zen calls the experience of Nirvana or Enlightenment.

come  
all  
this  
way  
drink

water  
leave

Liberation has two main aspects – viz, freedom from our mental limitations, conceptions and our prejudices; and enlightenment as to our real and true existence.

When the ignorance and the misunderstanding of our true and real self vanishes, then and then only does the real self stand in its own true effluence.

Santoka Taneda makes us halt in our worldly pursuits, making us wonder where we are really headed to :

happy being born,  
palms close  
open

The realization of liberation, the experience of bliss, the cognition of one's own real Self, is not an objective process by which we are trying to obtain something. It is simply experiencing one's own true self. It is not about destruction of the world, rather understanding the world as it really is.

nothing to do cherries  
bloom cherries fall

In the book entitled *Aspects of Indian Writing in English*, edited by M. K. Naik, regarding the Spiritual Society and its role, Sri Aurobindo, the eminent Indian philosopher has rightly quoted :

Throughout the world, there is a widespread fear that our hour to quit has come. This shows once again that the mind-life-body formula leads nowhere. We must extricate ourselves from the vicious circle by a fresh act of 'beyonding'.

To do so we have to look within and above, two powers that the reason uses but rarely. There is a chance that in the turn towards inner values, the undiscovered self or the energies of the psyche, we might get back to the source, the soul.

Santoka stupefies us by an exhorting haiku of his :

Searching for what?  
I walk in the wind

This Zen haiku gradually leads us towards a higher level of thought where the visible objects of the material world assume a higher, spiritual significance, making us pause and reflect.

Life is an endless pursuit for liberation, a seeking after self-fulfilment. Whether it is an internal journey or an external wandering of the spiritual quest, one has to end his exploration on which he has embarked, one has to find the true nature which is 'emptiness'.

Nothing left but to die;  
Mountains lost in mist.

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