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Meditations of the Walking Mendicant Taneda Santoka

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Abstract:

This research paper entitled **Meditations of the Walking Mendicant Taneda Santoka** aims to present the sense of freedom experienced in walking by the Zen monk Taneda Santoka. His walking was a form of meditation through which burst forth his vast collection of Zen haiku.

Taneda sought deliverance through his walking meditations; his life embodies the Zen spirit and is characterized by lack of duplicity, non-imitation and simplicity of expression. This eminent monk composed remarkable haiku which strike us with their characteristic brevity and precision.

Walking as a spiritual practice has been in vogue since ancient times. What differentiates Taneda Santoka from the other walking spiritual practitioners is his knack of composing striking, magnificent and ennobling haiku during his lifetime. His haiku make us pause for a while and reconsider our ways of day to day living.

Keywords: deliverance, haiku, meditation, mendicant, moksha, spiritual upliftment, Zen.

autumn wind

for all my walking –

for all my walking – (15)

Through this ‘Haiku’ of Taneda Santoka, translated by Burton Watson, *From All My Walking*, Free-Verse Haiku, with Excerpts from His Diary, Santoka says, I have walked and will keep on walking, whatever be the weather, whatever is the season, the pleasant spring has given way to the harsh autumn, but my walking must go on, for that’s what my life is all about – walking on and on and going on this endless journey called Life, in search of myself, in search of my meditations, my deliverance, my moksha.

Thinking of nothing

I walk among

A forest of withered trees (117)

The above haiku by Santoka Taneda, from John Stevens’ translated book *Mountain Tasting, Zen Haiku* (1991) gives the message to accept life as it is. Despite the ups and downs of life, there is a sense of continuity which is what life is all about.

Haiku is a short Japanese lyric form that represents in seventeen syllables ordered in five, seven, five syllables – the poet's emotion or spiritual response to natural objects, scene or season of the year. A haiku is characterized by brevity and precision; meaningful thoughts contained in a few words.

Santoka Taneda is one of the most well-known poets of the twentieth century free-style school of haiku. Almost his entire life was devoted to wandering, drinking and writing haiku. During his travels as a wandering monk, Santoka is said to have walked more than twenty-eight thousand miles.

Walking has been spiritually significant since times immemorial. Long walking tours have been undertaken in the olden days by religious men, both for spreading their message of peace and harmony as well as for the mere act of walking alone which uplifted their thoughts.

Apart from numerous health benefits, walking has been known to elevate the soul and provide spiritual upliftment. The Japanese mendicant Santoka Taneda has been known to be a devoted walker. Nearly a quarter of his life was spent as a walking mendicant Zen priest. He has composed numerous uplifting, ennobling and rejuvenating haiku during his solitary travels.

no help
for the likes of me
I go on walking (FAMW 27)

Walking for Taneda was not simply moving from one place to another, rather it was a way for him to connect to his inner being, to be in sync with natural objects like the trees, the wind, the mountains, the moon and the weeds, so that he could realize his oneness with the entire world, with each and every tangible thing in nature.

His walking provided him with valuable insights about life and its mysteries which were derived from his close observation of the natural objects and his surroundings.

all day
in the mountains
ants too are walking (FAMW 56)

Here, the life of an ant, tiny though in size, has been taken as equally significant. There hardly is any difference between the ants and human beings headed towards an unknown journey, lost in this mesh of life.

Santoka Taneda's walking trips were a form of walking meditation which has to be taken in the right spirit as expressed by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh :

When we practice walking meditation, we arrive in each moment. Our true home is in the present moment. When we enter the present moment deeply, our regrets and sorrows disappear, and we discover life, with all its wonders. Breathing in, we say to ourselves, I have arrived. Breathing out, we say, I am home. When we do this we overcome depression and dwell peacefully in the present moment, which is the only moment for us to be alive.

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'.

Walking meditation is called *kinhin*. Successive periods of zazen, which is sitting meditation are usually interwoven with brief periods of walking meditation to relieve the legs.

As per the Zen perspective, the optimum conditions for composing haiku are the 'priming' and the 'internalizing' of the form. In other words, it is getting into haiku mood and a contemplating state of mind.

Burton Watson in his translated book on Taneda Santoka entitled *For All My Walking*, presents the Diary Entry of the monk dated August 27, 1940, in Vol. 6 :

Writing of himself in later life, Santoka said :

Talentless and incompetent as I am, there are two things I can do, and two things only : walk, with my own two feet; compose, composing my poems. (53)

A pertinent haiku related to his musings is :

Well, which way should I go?

The wind blows (MT 46)

and

Walking in the freezing wind

Bitterly reproaching myself (MT 104)

In one of his diary entries, Santoka writes :

1st January, 1932. What I forever aspire to is a mind calm and free from pressure, a realm of roundness, wholeness that transcends self and others. Faith is its source, haiku poems are its expression. So I have to walk, walk, walk until I get there (FAMW 43).

Santoka's views are :

don't get angry

don't chatter

don't be greedy

walk slowly, walk steadily (FAMW 50)

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 :

The new thought according to which is an essential change of consciousness, not surface manipulation, that alone can rescue life from its present distressed and ambiguous figure and make the evolutionary process a gratifying rather than a painful experience. Put simply : one has to go inward in order to change the outward. Only thus may we attain Utopia before Oblivion occurs. There is no other way (277).

A haiku too is a thought-provoking idea, leading us on an inward journey, similar to the spiritual knowledge embodied in the above quotation by Sri Aurobindo.

In one of the last entries of his journals, as presented by John Stevens in his translated versions entitled *Mountain Tasting*, Taneda Santoka's words sum up his life in the following manner :

This is the path I must follow – there is no other road for me to walk on. It is a path containing both pleasure and pain. It is far off yet definite. It is very narrow and steep. However, it is also a white path[of purity], full of amazing and wonderful things. It is not a cold and lifeless way (20).

The journey of life is an incessant quest for some meaning, which always seems to elude us. All we can do is follow the great master Santoka Taneda, as expressed through his haiku :

There is nothing else I can do;
I walk on and on (MT 37)

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