Hail in the Begging Bowl

The Odyssey and Poetry of Santōka

by James Abrams

Into my metal bowl too,
hail.
Santōka

Taneda Santōka,¹ 1882–1940, is one of the most recent and perhaps one of the last of a long and colorful line of priest-poets in Japanese literary history. An alcoholic and business failure who became a Buddhist priest after an attempted suicide at the age of forty-two, Santōka spent the last sixteen years of his life as a raucous itinerant monk who survived through begging and the good graces of his many acquaintances. Throughout this period he was a voracious observer of life, nature and self in his prolific free-verse haiku. When Santōka died in October 1940 he was still a penniless alcoholic whose years of wandering and solitude had only made him more acutely aware of how far he remained from happiness and personal salvation. He had published seven small books of poetry which had been well received by his poetic circle but were almost entirely unknown by the Japanese literary world.

It has only been in the last ten years, with the publication of several biographical sketches of his life, that a minor ‘Santōka boom’ has brought the poet a measure of fame and reputation. The reasons for his recent rise to acclaim are not difficult to discern. People are first of all attracted to his lifestyle, the vagabond existence in which the road and pace of one’s life are chosen by day-to-day inclinations. It is a lifestyle that despite its inevitable mental and physical hardships has an alluring sense of romanticism and nostalgia for the majority of people burdened with the responsibilities of family and job.

The image of Santōka the man is also extremely appealing. A literate and garrulous man, he considered a good conversation and a bottle of sake to be the ultimate source of pleasure. He was welcomed with open arms into the homes of friends and strangers all over the country, despite the common knowledge that the priest would drink their sake, share their bed, and then cheerfully bid farewell the next morning without a word about repaying the hospitality. Photographs

¹ 種田山頭火
of the poet present us with an almost comic figure, large bamboo hat, priest's garb, thick spectacles, metal begging bowl, and two spindly legs supported on a pair of straw sandals. But if the pictures somehow epitomize the incongruity of his role as a priest and expose the eccentricity of the man, they also hint at a robust spirit, boundless curiosity, and a large capacity for friendship.

Then finally there are his poems, which for all their simplicity seem to have struck a harmonious chord with many Japanese. Sometimes as short as two words and seldom more than ten, Santōka’s free-verse haiku possess a degree of sincerity and involvement that is often lacking in Japanese poetry so dominated by form and convention.

Sincerity, of course, does not necessarily make for great poetry, and Santōka certainly did not possess the poetic genius of itinerant nature poets such as Saigyō or Bashō or the intellectual skills and polish of semi-recluses such as Kamo no Chōmei or Buson. Yet the intricate relationship between his artistic and experiential lives, coupled with his training in Zen and Buddhist thought, gives his work an acuteness of expression and at times a striking freshness.

This essay will in the main be devoted to an introduction to Santōka’s poetic works. To clarify his poems I have added a prefatory introduction to Santōka’s life and have tried to arrange his poems to give a clear image of his physical and mental transitions after he entered the priesthood. The poems selected are grouped mainly by subject matter rather than time period. I have tried to picture the man and the poet by choosing poems that best represent his feelings toward the subjects that were of primary concern to him—nature, religion, travel, sake, poetry, solitude, and death. Excerpts from his diary are also included.

Santōka’s Life

Santōka was born as Taneda Shōichi, the oldest son of Takejirō and Fusa, on 3 December 1882 in Bōgu, Yamaguchi prefecture, a rural area in western Japan. His father was a well-off landowner who kept two or three mistresses and seems to have been generally too busy with his affairs of the heart to properly manage his business. When Shōichi was ten years old, his mother, who had given birth to five children, committed suicide at the age of thirty-three by jumping into the family well. She was probably driven to the act by her husband’s dissipation and neglect of the family. The children were thereafter raised by an aunt.

Shōichi was a good student who from an early age showed an interest in literature. At the age of nineteen he left home for Tokyo to prepare for entering university, and in the following year he was admitted into the Department of Literature, Waseda University. It was in this period that he first began to use the

---

2 西行法師, 1118–90.  5 与謝蕪村, 1716–83.
3 松尾芭蕉, 1644–94.  6 種田正一
4 藤長明, 1153–1216.  7 竹治郎, フサ
pen name Santōka. It was also at this time that Shōichi first began to drink heavily. His inability to keep up with his classes was doubtlessly in part a result of his drinking habits, and in 1904, at the age of twenty-two, he suffered a nervous breakdown, dropped out of school, and returned to his father’s home. Takejirō, whose intemperate habits had not mellowed with age, was forced to sell his property in 1906, and in the same year father and son opened a sake brewery in a nearby village. However, from the start neither the womanizing father nor the drinking son showed much proclivity for running the business.

Unlike his father, Shōichi was throughout his life only minimally interested in women. He admits in his writings that the suicide of his mother had deeply wounded him and had left a void in his spirit which no other woman was ever able to fill. Despite his protests that he was determined to enter the priesthood and had no need for a wife, his father forced him into a marriage in 1909 with Satō Sakino, the oldest daughter of a man from a neighboring village. The new couple seem to have been on good terms for a few months, during which time Sakino became pregnant with their first and only child, Ken. But Shōichi began returning home drunk or staying out all night, and there was soon little or no intimacy between the two.

In 1911 Shōichi contributed translations of Turgenev and Maupassant to the literary journal Seinen. Two years later, at the age of thirty-one, he became a disciple of the poet Ogiwara Seisensui, a leader of the ‘new tendency school’ of haiku, which discarded the traditional use of seasonal words and the 5–7–5 syllables for a freer verse form. Shōichi, now using his literary name Santōka, at the same time began writing for Seisensui’s poetry journal, Sōun. In 1916, the same year in which he joined the staff of Sōun as a poetry editor, the sake business went bankrupt after father and son had allowed the sake to go sour for two straight years. Taking his wife and child, Santōka moved to Kumamoto city, where poetry acquaintances helped him to set up a secondhand bookstore.

His attempt to settle down into a normal life was again disrupted in 1918 when his younger brother Jirō committed suicide and Tsuru, the aunt who had raised him after his mother’s death, died. Santōka left the management of the bookstore and a later picture-frame shop to his wife, and more and more often had to be bailed out by his friends after running up drinking bills which he had no way of paying. In 1919 he left his wife to find work in Tokyo and in the following year Sakino obtained a divorce from him. Santōka found a job in Tokyo as a librarian, but after two years, in December 1922, he quit after another nervous breakdown. He stayed in Tokyo long enough to experience the devastating Great Kanto Earthquake in September 1923, soon after which he returned to Kumamoto.

8 佐藤サキノ
9 健
10 青年
12 新傾向派
13 墻雲
14 二郎
15 ツル
On a night in December 1924 a very intoxicated Santōka tried to commit suicide by standing in the path of an oncoming train. The engineer spotted him in time and the train managed to pull up before hitting him. Santōka was taken to a Zen temple in Kumamoto to recuperate and it was there that he resolved to begin training for the priesthood. In the following months he underwent a great change, forcing himself into a rigidly fixed regimen, and in February 1925, at the age of forty-two, he was ordained as a priest and assigned as custodian of a small temple in rural Kumamoto. For a year he served faithfully at the temple, opening a Sunday school and a night school for the villagers, while concentrating on his poetry. But he was continually plagued by the idea that a man of his spiritual weakness was in no way qualified to minister to the souls of the villagers who fed him and paid for the upkeep of the temple. Finally, unable to bear the isolation and his spiritual turmoil, he gave up his post in April 1926 and set off as a mendicant priest on wanderings that continued almost uninterrupted for six years.

Santōka was to destroy the diary of his early years on the road, and there is no clear record of where the priest’s wanderings took him. He apparently traveled throughout Kyushu, crossed over to Shikoku, and begged his way through most of the western end of the main island of Honshu. In 1929 and 1930 he returned briefly to Kumamoto and stayed with Sakino, helping in her store. He also again started to contribute to Sōun and began publication of his own poetry journal, Sambaku.¹⁶

By now his life had settled into a familiar pattern: an earnest attempt to lead a serious life, followed by a drinking and spending spree, deep repentance, and the start of another directionless, soul-cleansing journey. Santōka walked from village to village, chanting for alms at every farmhouse he passed by. He spent his nights in cheap lodging houses, which he paid for with his day’s take of coins and rice. Increasingly in his later years he also used his pilgrimages as an excuse to visit his wide range of poetry colleagues in western Japan, staying for a few days of good food and abundant sake before setting off for the next village or the next friend.

In the autumn of 1932, with the financial assistance of his admirers he settled into a country hermitage he named ‘Gochūan’,¹⁷ literally, ‘Cottage in that Midst’, in the village of Ogōri, Yamaguchi prefecture. In the same year he published his first book of poems, Hachi no Ko¹⁸ (‘Rice Bowl Child’), and put out a few more issues of Sambaku. He planted his first garden, and took pride in the fact that at least to a limited extent he could lead a self-dependent life. In the spring of 1934 the restless Santōka set off on a trip into the central mountains of Shinshū, but his fifty years of age were beginning to tell on him and he was hospitalized with acute pneumonia. Early in the following year, back at Gochūan, physically and mentally exhausted and increasingly obsessed with death, Santōka again tried to kill himself by taking a large quantity of sleeping pills. But by the following spring,
1936, he was back on the road, traveling to Tokyo for a meeting of Sōun backers and then heading north into the Tōhoku region.

The last few years of his life were spent in active writing and continual drifting. As he noted in his diary at that time, his only two purposes in life were ‘to produce all the true poems that are within me’ and ‘to die a blessed death, without lengthy pain, without being a burden to others.’ In 1938 he finally abandoned Gochūan, and after another trip eastward crossed over to Shikoku where, in December 1939, he settled down in a temple hermitage, again provided through the assistance of poetry colleagues, near the city of Matsuyama.

On 10 October 1940, his poetry companions gathered at the cottage for their regular discussion meeting and found Santōka in what seemed to be a drunken stupor, not an unusual condition. They left him sleeping and went ahead with their meeting, but after they had all returned home, a neighbor came by to check on him late that night and, finding his condition worsened, called a doctor. Santōka died early the next morning, shortly before his fifty-eighth birthday, of an apparent apoplexy.

**Motion**

The resolution of spiritual doubts through physical movement is hardly a new phenomenon peculiar to Santōka or Japanese priest-poets. Moses wandered through the desert for forty years before finding the Promised Land. Parcival and his contemporaries in the Middle Ages discovered the secrets of the heart and spirit after years of wandering from one adventure to another. Kerouac and his generation made the highway the modern path to salvation. What Santōka in particular inherited was a deeply ingrained Japanese tradition of seeking in nature itself a release from worldly anxiety and an opening to spiritual enlightenment. Since ancient times the excursion into nature has been linked with, and to a large extent indistinguishable from, the religious pilgrimage.

In the Heian period emperors and nobles led their entourages down rivers and into mountains for the dual purpose of visiting shrines or temples and stimulating the poetic and aesthetic sensibilities of the court. In the Middle Ages Saigyō and Chōmei, together with thousands of other priests and social outcasts, found that by retreating into nature they could to some extent relieve the burdens of living in a very troubled world. Yet while their Western counterparts have tended to seek wisdom and reason in their natural environment, Japanese nature-lovers asked of nature no more than to give them peace of mind. For some this meant silent and meditative absorption into nature; for others such as Santōka, it meant an exhausting physical experience, the positive and aggressive exposure of self to blazing suns, freezing rain, and endless roads of dust and mud.

What distinguishes Santōka in this long tradition is the almost desperate quality about his journeys. There were times when it was only motion, only day after day of walking, that maintained his sanity. As he notes in his diary:
Wordlessly I cross mountain after mountain. To an almost overpowering degree I feel the loneliness and tranquility of isolation. Thus I continue to walk, with questions of what will come next, what will I do, what ought I to do, and still I walk. There is nothing I can do but walk. To walk—that alone is far enough.

This idea of the vital necessity of movement and the partial release it brings to the anguish of his soul is a constant theme in his poems.¹⁹

どうしようもない
わたしが歩いてる

There can be no other way,
I keep walking.

Seeking something,
walking through the wind.

There is no road but this road,
a spring snow falls.

Open to the wind,
over and over condemning myself, I walk.

The muddied waters flow on,
clearing as they go.

Laying on the grass,
I open the wounds of this trip to the sun.

Santōka’s literary mentor Seisensui commented, ‘Santōka walks without purpose, walks like the clouds or the rivers, because he has to keep moving, because walking is living for him.’²⁰ This life force that refused Santōka an end to his journey is best illustrated in one of his most famous poems:

分け入っても
分け入っても
青い山

I push my way through,
push my way through,
green mountains.

Anyone who has ever climbed a mountain knows the experience of being certain that the ridge ahead must surely be the peak, only to discover that there is yet another ridge towering up behind it. For Santōka this feeling of frustration, mixed with determination to continue on, was not confined to one mountain top or one long day of traveling, but to years of wandering without finding his destination. He might scale one peak, find one moment of respite, but always with the final realization that there lay yet another road and another mountain in front of him.

¹⁹ The poems recorded here and elsewhere in this article are separate works and should not be confused as longer poems of several verses.
Santōka was himself greatly concerned about the unproductive, unstable nature of his life. Both before and after becoming a priest he made furiously enthusiastic attempts to reform himself and take proper care of his family. Through the years 1930 and 1931 he spent considerable time with his former wife Sakino in Kumanoto, trying to convince himself that he could be satisfied helping her tend the store, looking after their son Ken, and occupying himself with his poetry journals and poetry acquaintances. In 1933 and 1934 he temporarily found some degree of peace and calmness in his country retreat at Gōchūan. But in the end it was the very determination to settle down to a normal, secure life that led to his overpowering sense of guilt and self-condemnation when he found himself at the end of another drinking spree and forced him into yet another pilgrimage to cleanse his soul.

As Santōka left Gōchūan in December 1935 after another suicide attempt, he wrote:

水に雲かげも
おちつかせないものがある

Above the water passes the shadow of a cloud,
something will not let me be at peace.

And on the same trip he expressed his feelings as the sweet exhaustion of movement began to warm his body and heal his battered soul:

また一枚ぬぎすてる
旅から旅

One more layer stripped off,
from journey to journey.

Self-interrogation

It is essential to an understanding of Santōka’s inner turmoil to remember that when he did finally turn to religion it was to Zen and not to another Buddhist or Christian sect. As the following quotations from his diary reveal, what Santōka sought was not a god who would embrace him or a faith that would soothe his spirit, but a frame of mind that would permit him to strip himself of all his hypocrisies and teach him to accept with tranquility his place in the universe.

There is nothing so easy to say but so hard to do as ‘give up’. Resignation is not self-abandonment, nor blind obedience. Resignation is the spiritual peace permitted only after one has exhausted the heart and mind of things.

It was through Zen, which teaches that salvation can be reached only through self-discipline and order, not doctrine or faith, that Santōka tried to achieve this resignation and spiritual peace that so eluded him.

The following excerpts from his diary may also help to illustrate the nature of his harsh self-interrogation:

How can the man who cannot believe in himself possibly believe in God?

One day’s life resolves for that day alone one’s doubts about the universe,
Human life begins in conquest of one's self and it ends in conquest of one's self.

A man who has consumed all his power and has never known a word of prayer is a hero free of illusions.

If you find you must pray, turn toward yourself and pray.

Self-love is not self-flattery, it is not tolerance toward oneself. The man who loves himself is the most severe, the most heartless toward himself.

Weep not for seeking and not obtaining, but for seeking and not being fulfilled in what is gained.

The life of the weak is a continuing chain of acts of repentance. And this repentance is no more than repentance for its own sake.

In the strong too there are times of repentance, but there is no repentance of the kind that does not give rise to the bud of new life.

The truth is both full of mercy and at the same time brutal. Just as there is truth in God there is also truth in the devil.

To live the true life is to know suffering.

What we find in these aphorisms, a pursuit of Santōka’s into which he put a great deal of effort in his middle years, is the image of a sick man determined to cure himself through naked exposure to the elements, an existentialist who must interminably suffer the recognition of his inability to cope with life. Santōka sought to overcome his spiritual weaknesses by negating any outer source of salvation and putting all his energy into self-interrogation and self-revelation. But in his pursuit of the truth about himself he was to find that his weaknesses became all the more apparent, that he was undeniably a bogus priest who was unable to control his physical appetites and lived off the good will of his friends. Thus the truth led to suffering, and suffering became almost an aesthetic virtue worthy of cultivation. He wrote:

The honest man must suffer. The honest man becomes honest in proportion to his suffering. Pain deepens thought and strengthens life. Pain is the purification of life.

If the search for truth results not in the salvation of peace of mind but in the further accumulation of suffering, and if by choice or fate the final escape of death is not yet open, then suffering has to be recognized for its inextricable relationship to life.

Even when he doubted god, doubted man, and even doubted himself, he could never doubt the fact of his own suffering. To that extent was his suffering deeply embedded and deeply rooted in his existence.
Pain always comes from within, never from without. The seed of pain that we plant, we ourselves must harvest and drink of its fruit. Pain cannot be broken, it can only be embraced. We must grasp the dark power at the bottom of pain.

Yet Santōka was not unaware of the dangerously sentimental and masochistic nature of his excessive inclination to suffer. As noted above, he found his purposeless acts of repentance nothing more than an additional form of weakness, to be scorned and ridiculed.

Just as there is seduction in pleasure, there is attraction in pain. Those people whose lives are nothing but pain yet have no fear of death often continue to live, not because of the will for existence but because they have grasped the sweetness at the bottom of pain.

To taste pain is valuable, but to become accustomed to pain is fearful.

The emptiness of those who torture their flesh in order to soothe their spirit.

This last statement reads like a condemnation of his entire course of life. The man who will walk thousands of miles to calm his spirit realizes even before the journey has begun that it will all be meaningless and futile. But it is also the only course left to him, and he must travel it with humility and dignity.

The man who has come from hell does not shout and run. Silently, gazing fixedly at the earth, he walks.

Nature and Simplicity

Santōka’s path away from the established life of man into nature has been followed by numerous religious and intellectual figures in Japanese history. The world of nature has offered a limitless arena of serenity, inevitability, and unalterable flow for those who had been too caught up in the worldly affairs of man to contemplate mortal life and universal eternity.

But Santōka was also a priest who never believed in an eternal afterlife and who had despaired of ever achieving salvation. As a consequence his perception of the hundreds of mountains and rivers he crossed in his journeys was of a different dimension from the view of those who sought in nature a definition of life. Santōka never attempted to solve the divine pattern manifested in nature, nor did he try to find in nature a symbolic equivalent to human mortality.

While Santōka’s poetry abounds in images from nature, he almost completely ignores such traditional images as the plum and cherry blossoms, the nightingale, wild geese, and maple leaves. He was consciously trying to break away from binding poetic conventions, and he was not interested in the well-established religious and philosophical connotations that they suggested. Santōka was to find expression
for his own state of being in the growth and decay of nature, but he was far too involved in revealing his own individual soul to find universal truths in the scattering of blossoms or the falling of autumn leaves. His religious deference to nature is of a more undefinable, emotional quality, a sense of awe before the miracle and profoundity of life:

たふとときは
ましろなる鶏

Sacredness,
a pure white chicken.

播けば生える
土のおちつきを踏む

What is sown will grow,
I tread firmly the calmness of the earth.

秋ふかり
水をもらってもる

Receiving the deep autumn waters,
I return.

風の中声よりあげて
南無観世音

A voice stirring above the wind,
‘Praise to Kannon.’

The first of the above poems was written when Santōka spotted a chicken perched on the roof of a temple he was visiting. He finds that the strikingly white living animal is able to convey a deeper impression of sacredness than the temple and the religious images within it. The next two poems express a sense of joyful thanksgiving on experiencing the bountifulness of nature. Nature is a religious altar, offering worshipers myriad rewards. And in the final poem he hears a voice real or imagined, or perhaps his own, that seems to harmonize with the wind in an endless, amorphous chant to Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy.

But much more than the reverence for nature’s mystery and profoundity, it was the sense of serenity and in some instances joy in the simplicity and unequivocality of nature that sustained Santōka on his journeys and provided the source of his poetry. He approached nature in literally an almost naked state, carrying his alms bowl and one pair of chopsticks as his luggage. In his view, to protect himself from nature was a sacrilege against his self-proclaimed discipline of simplicity. He even went to the extent of refusing to wear false teeth after all his teeth had fallen out and, except in the most dire cases, declining the use of mosquito nets, both needless artifices for a man who has opened himself up to nature in its entirety. Santōka was rewarded while this tenacity of spirit lasted with a view of life and nature at its most basic and unadorned, and this view at times filled him with a joy as profound as his grief could be limitless.

ヘうヘうとして
水を味う

With a buoyant heart,
I taste the water.

Santōka’s love of cold, clear water was almost as great as his taste for sake. In this small but spirited verse the poet’s heart surges with pleasure as the cool liquid circulates through his hot and tired body. He does not drink the water but tastes it, absorbs it into himself. Other poems with water as the theme include:
Santōka on his first begging journey.
Mt Aso, October 1929.
Santōka on one of his journeys in 1936.
Abrams: Hail in the Begging Bowl

The going gets late, how sweet this water tastes.
Winter-withered mountain, all the water one can drink.
Together with the sound of water I have descended to the village.

Santōka’s poems expressing his real joy in the simplicity of his life on the road or at the hermitage, and the unambiguity with which the natural scene complements this joy, are among his very best. To give a small sampling:

Ah, the sparrow dances, Ah, the dandelions scatter.
Finally it has blossomed, the flower is white.
Stretching out my legs to take in the day’s last rays of sun.
Evening sky, the silhouettes of farmers in their fields deepen.
Not a wisp of cloud, I take off my bamboo hat.
The wind through the pines is cool, man eats, horse eats.
As I walk, buttercups, as I sit, buttercups.
The ground moist with morning dew, I go where I want.
Suddenly, something grazing past in the wind.
The hotness, sweetness of potato gruel, autumn has come.
The sun’s rays lingering on withered leaves—the color is sad.
Santōka tells of one small town in Kagoshima where the police would not allow him to beg. Buying a newspaper, he spent the day lounging in the sun, then checked into a cheap lodging house where he was quartered with a Korean peddler, a traveling masseur, and a stone polisher. After exchanging stories with these other men of the road, he wrote letters for both the illiterate masseur and polisher, and then when all had gone to bed he took out his diary and wrote of his day:21

みんな寝てしまった At last they are all asleep,
よい月夜かな ah, it’s a good, moonlight night.

He found particular attraction in the fertility and tenacity of weeds, writing in his diary, ‘My existence is not different from that of wild grass. But in that alone I find satisfaction.’ The following poem expresses the wild beauty and vitality of weeds:

あるがまま In its natural state
雑草として as a weed,
茅をふく it shoots forth its buds.

Just as Santōka sang of the white chicken perched on the temple roof, he found in the whiteness and plainness of his main and often only food, rice, a constant source of celebration:

飯のうまさが The sweetness of rice,
青い青い空 a blue, blue sky.

落葉あたたかく The fallen leaves are warm,
かみしめる御飯の光 from the rice I chew a glow.

光あまねく Light fills the air,
御飯しろく the rice is shining white.

飯のうまさも The sweet taste of rice,
ひとりかみしめて alone, chewing.

こぼろぎよ Crickets,
あすの米だけはある only enough rice for tomorrow.

月夜 A moonlight night,
あるだけの米をとぐ polishing the only rice I have.

Another joy was a hot morning bath. Santōka loved the hot springs of Kyushu, and when he had the money he spent long days luxuriating at the baths:

---

21 Ōyama Sumita 大山満太, Haijin Santōka 俳人山頭火の生涯, Yayoi Shobō, 1971, p. 44.
Soaking in the quietness
of a brimming morning bath.

The pleasantness of a morning bath,
quietly waiting my turn in the steam.

My stark naked body,
revealed to the sun.

Even in the last year of his life, with his physical energy sorely reduced and in a deepened state of depression over his incorrigible lifestyle, he was able to write verses full of wonder at the beauty and simplicity of nature:

A persimmon resting on my palm,
fascinatingly red.

If Santōka denied an afterlife, he was still a firm believer in the perpetual present, and nature, always changing but always the same, was the manifestation of this tenseless world. In the preface to his poetry collection Sankō Suikō (‘Mountain Travels, Water Travels’), he writes the poem,

When in the mountains
I will watch the mountains,
On rainy days
I will listen to the rain,
Spring, summer, fall, winter,
Morning is good,
Evening is good.

This sense of the world of today, the reduction of life to a single object and a single moment, is also seen in these poems:

Today,
I pick butterbur flowers,
I eat butterbur flowers.

Today,
the roadside dandelions of this day
have blossomed.

Endlessness

Yet if there were moments of joy in his travels, there were also times when Santōka felt the endlessness of his trek and the vastness of the natural world draining his energy and weighing him down. The spatial and temporal infinitude of
nature made him painfully aware of the insignificance and the futility of his attempt to confront nature in its rawest form. He wrote,

In the midst of life and death, a steady fall of snow.

The poem could be translated more prosaically, ‘The snow of life and death falls steadily’—a rather trite statement of the continuity of nature. A similar poem by the poetry master Saigyō offers a deeper insight into what Santōka was saying:

Though I know this cicada-shell body to be a trifling thing, this day of falling snow is bitter cold.23

Like Santōka, Saigyō was continually struggling with the contradiction between his desire to come to grips with mortality and his attachment to life. And in both of their poems, they have come to the disheartening realization that their inner struggle is of so little significance in the face of the reality of a chilling winter snowfall. In Santōka this despair in the insignificance of his existence is often expressed in terms of the immeasurable vastness of the world in which he travels:

Waking from an afternoon nap, whichever way I look, mountains.
The shrikes cry, there is no place to abandon myself.
My home is far away, the sprout of a tree.
Picking up a stick in the wind, I walk on.
The sound of water, from afar, from near, leading me on.
The crow crying, the crow flying, no place to settle down.
Swelltering heat, train tracks straight into the distance.

23 Itō & Ogiwara, p. 98.
A crow flies off,
I will cross the water.

Unending rain,
mountains,
more mountains,
unknown mountains.

My spirit is exhausted,
the mountains, the sea,
are too beautiful.

Filled with shades of night
the water flows on,
autumn lodgings.

The endless journey, and the insignificance Santōka attached to man-built monuments, are well expressed in the poem that he wrote after completing a long journey to the famous ancient city of Hiraizumi in the northern area of Tōhoku in 1936. It was the farthest north Santōka ever traveled.

I have come this far,
a drink of water, and I am gone.

Several visits to the coast of the rough Japan Sea evoked similar sentiments of the vastness of nature:

My heart empty,
the surge and ebb
of pounding waves.

The sound of waves is unending,
home is so far away.

Thrusting my legs into the wild sea,
a journey stretching into the past,
into the future.

Now I am here,
the blueness of the sea is infinite.

There is also the short but difficult poem:

I ford across
a bone-dry stream.

One can only guess at the emotions of the poet as he wrote this last poem, but from his emphasis on ‘bone-dry’ (karekitta), it may well be imagined that Santōka here too felt the vitality of his journey seeping away, that the lifeless riverbed had
again reminded him of the ultimate emptiness and terrible loneliness of his unending path.

_Loneliness_

If a sense of insignificance before nature was the philosophical burden that Santōka had to carry, loneliness and a sense of isolation were the more visceral feelings he experienced in his life on the road. By temperament he was a man who loved good companionship, and his forays into unfamiliar regions where he knew no one were conscious acts of self-discipline and penitence for his frequent falls from grace. This forced separation heightened his awareness of the isolation and loneliness of being in a place where he suddenly had no one to talk to and fall back on. The intensity of this feeling is shown in some of his poems:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>鶏ないて  私も一人</td>
<td>A crow caws, I too am alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>雪ふる  ひとりひとりゆく</td>
<td>Falling snow, alone, alone I go.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>落ちかかる月を観てゐるに  一人</td>
<td>Watching the moon begin to sink, I alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>まっすぐな道で  さみしい</td>
<td>On a straight road, so lonely.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>其中一人 いつも一人  の草芽ゆる</td>
<td>In the midst alone, always alone, the grass is bursting into bloom.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One can hardly doubt the depth of the poet's emotions in these poems, but they are perhaps too direct, too filled with pathos, to escape the charge of being uncomfortably sentimental. Santōka is better able to convey the feeling without the theatrical pose in his poems in which he uses a more classical approach of Japanese literature, such as expressing his loneliness in the sadness of autumn:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Japanese</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>家を持たない秋が  ふかうなるばかり</td>
<td>Without a home of my own, the autumn becomes ever deeper.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>道がなくなり  落葉しようとしている</td>
<td>The road has disappeared, the leaves whisper of their fall.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>枯枝ぼきぼき  おもふことなく</td>
<td>The snap of dried twigs, not a thought in my head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>一すぢの水をひき  一つ家の秋</td>
<td>A single stream of water drawn down upon a solitary house, shades of autumn.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abrams: Hail in the Begging Bowl

The tips of reeds, walking on with the path of the wind.

There is also this moving poem written on returning to his empty hermitage after a long journey:

Penetrating quiet, dust on the desk.

Various other poems aptly express this mood:

The winter night that has left me here, in such a way.

A whole day without a word, the sound of waves.

Someone speaks in a voice like my father, this trip is filled with sadness.

Walking through the autumn rains, a village where no one will let me in.

Iron begging bowl, receiving a falling leaf.

Into my metal bowl too, hail.

This last poem, one of Santōka’s best known, was written on a cold January day as he walked companionless along a deserted seacoast. It calls on the reader to imagine both the scene and the sound of hail hitting the metal alms bowl. The dull metallic ring of the bowl shivers through the body of the solitary figure, increasing his coldness and sense of isolation.

Mention must also be made of Santōka’s deep attraction to shigure, the long cold drizzles of autumn, as an image to describe the loneliness of the long journey, both in its figurative and literal sense. This subject is taken up in an essay on Santōka by the literary scholar Maruya Saiichi, and I will here present only a few of Santōka’s poems on the subject:

Autumn rains, walking deep into the mountains of the autumn rains.

That sound— autumn rain?

Maruya Saiichi 丸谷才一, Yokoshigure 横しひれ, Kodansha, 1975.
From morning an autumn drizzle,
the beauty of persimmon leaves.

Soaked in an autumn rain,
the friend I await has come.

A steady autumn drizzle,
one road, straight ahead.

A temple among the pines,
here I will stay.

Begging and Self-ridicule

Another factor that made his journeys long and lonely was a strong inner resistance to the act of mendicancy which he demanded of himself as a monk on pilgrimage. He disliked begging, disliked staying in cheap, crowded, and noisy inns, and, in the tradition of many of the literary recluses of Japan, preferred when possible to accept the shelter provided by his friends and benefactors.²⁵ He was also aware of the hypocrisy of justifying his purposeless wandering by the donning of a monk’s garb, and he often thought himself nothing more than a dissipated beggar disguised as a holy man seeking enlightenment. His friends were in general agreement that Santôka was basically a poet and not a priest, and that his priest’s robes were of secondary importance in his life and work,²⁶ but Santôka had to convince himself that his pilgrimages were not in fact compounding the sinful nature of his life.

He justified his begging by telling himself that he did not presume to give sermons but did awaken the spirit of Buddha in people by receiving alms.²⁷ He also lived by a fairly strict rule that when he had received enough for his daily living needs he would stop begging and return to writing or walking. There were times when he found satisfaction or at least resignation in this life, as in these poems:

Tossed to me in offering,
the shine of a single coin.

No more houses where I can beg,
clouds over the mountains.

More often he chose to see himself as a humorous and good-natured, if somewhat ridiculous, oddity. In a poem titled ‘Self-image’, he describes himself as,

²⁵ Maruya, p. 54.
²⁶ Ito & Ogiwara, p. 132.
²⁷ Oyama, p. 38.
He tried to put himself over as a foolish, harmless old man, not to be held responsible for his eccentricities:

Dressed in rags, bulging in padded winter-clothes, a face of innocent happiness.

In another poem, written in 1931 as he started out on another trip, he laughs at himself rather ruefully in a poem titled ‘Self-ridicule’:

A receding figure, soaked in the autumn rains?

His complete lack of possessions, his primitive way of living, are laughed at in the poems about his teeth, of which only three remained by the time he was fifty:

No money, no possessions, no teeth, alone.

Something missing, another tooth fallen out, I heave it into the evening darkness.

But there were also times when humor would not sustain the weight of his self-abuse, as in the autumn of 1930 when, after drinking up his gains, he cried, ‘It is truly shameful that the gifts I receive are converted directly into alcohol and nicotine.’ It was at these times that his chanting and begging took on a more distracted, guilt-ridden quality.

Walking into the wind, heaping abuse upon myself.

Taking in the scorching sun, begging as I go.

I go on soaked by the rain of my selfish, willful journey.

On his way back from a trip to northern Japan in 1936 he stopped wearing his priest’s robes in penitence for indulging in an eating and drinking binge that he could not pay for and again having to be bailed out by a friend. In the last year
of his life when his fortunes were at an ebb, he once more stripped off his robes and for a short time sought alms not as a priest but as a mere beggar:

もとの乞食になって タオルが一枚

Once again the beggar that I was, a single towel.

As his life drew toward its end and he realized that he was as far away from any kind of enlightenment as ever, Santōka began to lose confidence in his begging, his efforts became half-hearted, and alms were often not enough for food and lodging. His despondency was reflected in a letter he wrote to a young poet who wanted to emulate his lifestyle, for he sharply rebuked the man for even thinking about leading such an irresponsible life.29

In a short poem titled ‘Regrets’, written in his later years, he asks himself:

笠も 漏りだしたか

My bamboo hat— has it too begun to leak?

The wide-brimmed kasa that Santōka had worn for so many years had finally begun to rot and fall apart, and he rather wistfully ridicules his own tattered, worn-out body as it too gradually begins to waste away.

Seclusion

In 1932, at the age of fifty, Santōka found temporary respite from his long journey when he began to live in the hermitage that his friends had renovated for him in the village of Ogori. He named it ‘Gochūan’, ‘Cottage in that Midst’, from a Kannon sutra which contains the phrase, ‘In that midst a solitary man wrote, and this he sang’.30

A friend who taught at a local agricultural high school mobilized his students to rebuild the abandoned cottage, and Santōka’s closest friend, fellow Sōun poet Kimura Rokuhei31 of Kumamoto, was put in charge of a modest fund to provide him with a periodic allowance. The money was entrusted to Rokuhei to prevent Santōka from spending it all in one drunken splurge. The first days at Gochūan were some of the most tranquil Santōka was ever to experience. After settling down there, he wrote:

Finally I have returned to the world of existence; I feel that I can actually speak of ‘returning home, meditating in peace’. For a long time I have wandered. Not only my body but my heart has wandered. I have suffered the fact that I must live. I have found anguish in the necessity of existence. Thus finally I have been able to find peace with existence, and through that I have discovered myself.32

29 Maruya, p. 111.  
30 其中一人作是唱言  
31 木村緑平  
He busied himself in writing, keeping his few belongings in spotless order, visiting with neighbors, and receiving old friends and new acquaintances eager to listen to his endless stories and share with him a bottle of sake. For the first time he cultivated his own garden and received great satisfaction from watching the products of his labors:

朝焼雨ふる
大根まう
Over a red sunrise
a rain is falling,
I will plant radishes.

His contentment in this period is reflected in poems that show a genuine sense of harmony and optimism in life:

蜘蛛は網張る
私は私を肯定する
けさは水音も
よいたよりでもありさらな
ひっそり暮せば
みそささい
The spider weaves his web,
I affirm myself.
This morning the sound of water,
a feeling that good news will come.
To live life in tranquility,
a wren.
Opening the window,
a window full of spring.

Every day naked,
butterflies,
dragonflies.

Dusk,
polishing a placid kettle.

Receiving,
contented,
alone, I lay down my chopsticks.

Yet just as on the road Santōka was constantly battling the loneliness of being in a strange land, so also in his cottage life there was the oppressing loneliness of silence and long hours of inactivity. Loneliness is a theme with a long history in Japanese literature, but for Santōka it was something of a different dimension from the concept of courtiers such as Murasaki Shikibu33 or Ki no Tsurayuki,34 who found in it social refinement, or the renga masters Sōgi35 and Shinkei,36 who made it into a standard of beauty. Loneliness continually gnawed at Santōka, depriving him of the peace of mind he so desperately sought and driving him to the bouts of self-oblivion and mindless wandering he so wanted to avoid.

Santōka tried to overcome the pain of loneliness at Gochūan. He urged himself to surrender to the very essence of solitude. ‘We must bear the loneliness of isolation. We must overcome our own coldness. We must dig down into there and from that bottom lick the sweet taste of life oozing out.’ He tried to discipline himself to accept solitude coolly, without emotion: ‘Do not write in tears. The poem written in tears is both cowardly and superficial. Until the tears have completely dried, sit in silence, alone, and think.’

For the next few years he spent much of his time at the cottage, often in contentment and often in nearly unbearable restlessness, but always conscious of being alone.

Snow settles upon snow,
I am in the midst of quietude.

Waking, the snow is falling,
it is not lonely,
and yet. . . .

A crow on a withered tree,
The New Year has come and gone.

33 紫式部, 11th century.
34 紀貫之, 868–943.
35 宗祇, 1421–1502.
36 心敬, 1406–75.
ABRAMS: Hail in the Begging Bowl

机上―りん
おもむろにひらく
ある日は人のこひしさも
木の芽葉の芽
いつもひとりで
赤とんぼ
うれしいことも
かわしいことも
草しげる
ここおおつかば
水の音
けぶもいちにち
誰も来なかった
ほうたる

One flower on the desk,
slowly opening.

One day the longing for a friend,
buds of trees, buds of grass.

Always alone,
a red dragonfly.

Feelings of joy,
and feelings of sadness,
thickly growing grass.

When I calm my heart,
the sound of water.

Today, too, all day,
no one has come,
fireflies.

This last poem is somewhat reminiscent of Saigyō’s verse,

深き山は
人もとひこぬ
住まひなるに
おびただしきは
むら猿の声

Deep in the mountains,
in this retreat
where no man comes,
the only sound
is the clamor of monkeys.37

While dragonflies and monkeys are quite different as an artistic image, both poets see or hear another living creature in their isolated world, and the fact that these living things are beyond the realm of human communication makes the solitude of the poet even more poignant.

もくもく蚊帳のうち
ひとり飯喰ふ
影もぼそそ
夜ふけの私が
たべてゐる
たばこやに
たばこがない
寒の雨ふる
誰もるない
落葉掃きよせておる
昼ふかく

No one to talk to,
I eat my dinner under the mosquito net.

The shadows subdued,
deep at night
I am eating.

At the tobacco shop
no cigarettes,
a cold rain falls.

No one is here,
the fallen leaves I swept away,
deep in the day.

37 Sankashū 山家集: 793.
Despite his sincere efforts to settle down to a peaceful and moderate life, Santōka would still at times be found passed out along the road after frantic drinking bouts. He occasionally received funds from his benefactors, but his drinking kept him destitute most of the time. Leading a sedentary life, he was unable to consume his excess energy and frustration, and he came to feel more and more closed in:

閉めて一人の
障子を虫が
来てたたく

Closed in, by myself,
an insect comes rapping
against the sliding door.

As time went by his need to travel again began to stir him, and although he was not to abandon Gochūan for good until 1938, his interests had long before started to wander, and the cottage gradually fell into a state of disrepair.

壁がくぐれて
そこから蔓草

The wall is crumbling,
vines creeping in.

Friendship

I have nothing at all, nothing except friends. To have such good friends is a source of pride for me.

It is yet another of the ironies of Santōka’s life that the man who put such faith in self-discovery was ultimately to find his only real source of pleasure in the companionship of others. He asked much of his friends and at times caused them a great deal of trouble, but it is a tribute both to the irresistible warmth of his character and the Japanese tolerance toward the failings of old friends that they continued to greet him with genuine pleasure when he appeared at their houses.

Santōka first visited Kimura Rokuhei, his longtime benefactor, in Kumamoto in 1918. After an evening of convivial conversation Santōka left for home, but his good spirits led him into a sake shop for one more round. The next morning Rokuhei received a visit from the police, who told him that Santōka had landed in jail for getting drunk and being unable to pay his bill, and that he had told the police to ask his new friend to bail him out.

Rokuhei did so, as he was to do many times during their long friendship. It is possible, in fact, that Santōka might have been a greater poet, of the caliber of Saigyō or Bashō, had he not been so well taken care of by his friends.38 Santōka would feel deeply repentant after causing his friends such trouble, but would soon be calling on them again, ready for yet another round. Some of his friends’ wives were less than overjoyed to see the bedraggled monk turn up again for another disrupting three or four days of eating and drinking, but few could begrudge the man who accepted their hospitality with such sincere and ingenuous gratitude.

38 Kaneko Tōta 金子兜太, Taneda Santōka, Kodansha, 1974, p. 16.
It would not be difficult to draw parallels between the broken home life of the boy Shōichi and of the man Santōka, who almost willfully formed relationships of dependence in his friendships, but it is perhaps worthwhile emphasizing the deep craving Santōka had for friendship and the real joy he derived from it.

People’s compassion touches my heart,
I stroke the warm brazier.
The quilt is long,
the night too is long,
I have been given this place to sleep.
A well-stuffed quilt,
dreams of home.
A grasped hand,
chaps.

Naked,
talk jumps back and forth.
The sound of wind chimes,
at the time when you should come.
As the grass starts to stir,
for some reason I wait for a friend to come.
When the clouds of dusk are so beautiful,
I yearn for a friend.
The sound of voices approaching,
buds of trees brightly bearing.
I have nothing particular to wait for. . .
In the fall of evening
the cry of cicada.

This last poem is similar to one written by the great Shinkokinshū poetess Shikishi Naishinnō.39

The fall paulownia leaves
have even now
made passage difficult,
though by no means
is there someone I would wait for.
Just as friendship was his greatest joy, parting was for Santōka the hardest of all acts. He tried to make farewells as painless as possible by exchanging quick, light goodbyes and then briskly setting out down the road. One poet acquaintance tells of the first time Santōka invaded his home, when the two drank and talked and slept together for three days; then at the time of parting, the monk murmured a word of thanks, and, contrary to Japanese custom, marched off down the road without a glance back at his host and new friend.40

Departing, each on our separate ways,
I turn my face to the sun.

But if Santōka tried to make his partings as unemotional as possible, both his partings in life and by death left a deep impression on him.

Face to face we smile,
we who will never meet again.

So easily it darkens
in the reluctance of our parting,
a ten-day moon.

The road of our parting
runs straight ahead.

Drifting off from the water,
the lamp of the girl
dances in the dark.

Perhaps we will not meet again,
a blur of tree sprouts.

Since we parted,
every day the snow has fallen.

Both the snow on a distant mountain
and a friend who has gone away.

My cough won’t stop,
no hand to beat my back.

Of course, the most difficult parting of all was that of death, not only because of the personal loss involved but also because the death of another made even more acute Santōka’s sense of guilt in not fulfilling his obligations to the living and his despair over his inability to achieve a quick and graceful death.

40 Itō & Ogiwara, pp. 147–51.
The peach tree has begun to bear fruit, you have already died.

With a tomato in my palm, in front of Buddha,
in front of my father, in front of my mother.

No trace left of the house of my birth, fireflies.

Sake

If there was only one thing that remained constant throughout Santōka’s chaotic life, it was his weakness for sake. *Sake* was for him both an elixir and the source of his destruction; despite his periodic feeble attempts at abstinence, it played, as Santōka well realized, an integral role in determining the course of his life. His friends and acquaintances generally agree that Santōka was a confirmed alcoholic, and it would be difficult to find fault with that diagnosis. His drinking was certainly to some extent moderated by his constant lack of funds, but when he was treated by friends, he drank with a relish and abandon that filled people with amazement and consternation. That drink was another form of escape, a mental pilgrimage not essentially different in purpose from his constant urge to wander, is undeniable. *Sake* released him briefly from his unhappy childhood, his inability to take care of his family, and his guilt over his dissipated course of life.

His poetry mentor Seisensui said that as the years went by Santōka was no longer able to distinguish between the worlds of drunkenness and sobriety, that it was only through drinking that he was able to attain some level of sobriety.\(^{41}\) While Seisensui’s theory may appear somewhat oversimplified, it seems to be true that when Santōka drank he enjoyed those few delicious moments in which the mental state which he had been seeking through Zen and through begging—a calm acceptance of life, a feeling of security, and confidence in himself and his relationships with people—were suddenly opened up to him. According to Santōka, ‘Dreams are the sake of the consoled spirit. *Sake* is the dream of the anguished flesh.’ The sense of transcendence brought on by sake may indeed be an illusion, a dream that makes the attainment of real enlightenment even more difficult, yet for Santōka this temporary respite from the anguished flesh was irresistible.

In his diary Santōka constantly lectures himself on how to drink in order to enjoy its many virtues without suffering from its many evils. For example, ‘There is no crime in intoxicating sake. There is poison in sake that does not intoxicate.’

\(^{41}\) Itō & Ogiwara, p. 206.
Also,

The sake we drink is sake drunk for its taste; it is sake that we should sip, sake drunk with a smile. Do not drink in tears—drink laughing. Do not drink alone—drink shoulder to shoulder. Do not drink sake that, no matter how much you drink, cannot make you drunk; drink sake that intoxicates while the taste is still on the lips. Do not drink bitter sake—drink sweet sake.

The man who cannot spontaneously become intoxicated must finally destroy himself.

Sake ought not to be drunk in times of discontent. Drinking when we are not discontented, we can penetrate to the true taste of the liquid.

There were times when Santōka expressed the pure delight of drinking, as in his famous poem:

ほろほろ酔うて  A soft whirling drunk,
木の葉散る  a scattering of leaves.

The poem revolves around the adverb horohoro, which signifies a mellow, blissful, sentimentally happy state of drunkenness, and also describes the fluttering and dancing of falling leaves. The drunken poet is like the leaves—floating, weightless, carried aimlessly to and fro by the cool autumn breeze.

He also wrote about the mental and physical pain his drinking brought him:

酔へなくなった  The pitifulness
みじめさは  of not being able to get drunk,
こほろぎがなく  the crickets cry.

醒ざめの風の  Waking from drunkenness,
かなしくも吹きぬける  the wind blows mournfully through.

In September 1940, just one month before his death, his body weakened but his thirst unabated, he wrote:

酒はない  No more sake,
月しみじみ  staring fixedly
観てより  at the moon.

One of the best illustrations of Santōka’s powerful craving for drink is an incident which took place when he came down with acute pneumonia while traveling in the snowy Japan Alps in early 1934. The hospital which took him in refused to accept his claim that alcohol was his ‘best medicine’, so the thirsty Santōka was obliged to sneak out in his hospital slippers to down a few hot sake drinks at a nearby restaurant. Feeling thoroughly recovered after this refreshment, he boarded the next train and began the long journey back to Gochūan.
Writing

Santōka tends to leave the impression of a talented but undisciplined poet who did little more than jot down his tiny vignettes of life as they appeared before his eyes. He wrote thousands of poems and to a certain extent forces upon the reader the task of sifting through them to decide which are the ‘better’ works of art. Santōka admits in his diary, ‘Rather than poetry produced skillfully, I desire the poem unskillfully born.’ Just as he tried to reduce his way of life to its simplest elements, he believed that the good poem was one that arose out of the most pure and direct response to a scene or personal experience. He was an incorrigible romantic, who dreamed of taking all the artifice out of art and returning it to its ‘natural’ state. ‘I want to make my poems sing like the floating clouds, like the flow of water, like a small bird, like the dancing leaves.’

While prizing the spontaneity of the poetic sentiment, however, Santōka also went to surprisingly great pains to polish the final poetic form. He worked laboriously on his poems, rewriting, discussing them with friends, and corresponding with other poets for advice. Like many haiku and short-verse poets in Japan, he was capable of long debates and considerable personal discomposure over a single grammatical particle or verb tense. The tremendous energy Santōka spent in reviewing and rephrasing his work is very much in the tradition of Japan’s recluse writers, those poets and essayists such as Kamo no Chōmei and Yoshida Kenkō, who to various degrees withdrew from society and set about trying to communicate their views to that society in as fluent a manner as possible. This need for the ‘detached’ writer to express himself has its elements of irony, especially for such writers as Saigyō and Santōka who were making very conscious attempts to overcome their self-centered personalities. But writing, especially poetry, can also be a means of disciplining the mind and calming the raging spirit, and it was in this respect that Santōka, and Saigyō, found in poetry a possible road to salvation.

In preparing his poetry collections Santōka showed a meticulousness completely out of harmony with his ordinary drunken, unregulated life. In his collection *Sankō Suikō* he went through two thousand of his poems to select a mere 140 which he considered good enough to include in the work. As an example of his selection process we have his comments at the end of his collection titled *Kaki no Ha* (‘Persimmon Leaf’):

> あるけば
> 草の実
> すわれば
> 草の実

When I walk,
fruit-bearing grasses,
when I sit,
fruit-bearing grasses.

---

43 吉田兼好, 1283–1350.
44 柿の葉
When I walk,
  cuckoos,
when I run,
cuckoos.

One or the other verse had to be discarded, but it was difficult for me to
discard either of them. I traveled through the Tohoku region, and in con-
stant surprise at the large number of cuckoos I listened to their song with
great interest. And on the Shinano road for the first time in my life, I even
cought a glimpse of the bird.

After all,
to be alone is good,
wild grasses.
After all,
to be alone is sad,
dried-up grasses.

I am for ever possessed by sentimental feelings of self-love, but consider-
ing that such feelings are not allowed in an individual collection of verse
I arbitrarily chose one for the book. I believe that readers will be able
to understand my frame of mind.45

In both cases he chose the second poem for the collection, not so much on its
own merits as an independent poem but on the degree of his personal involve-
ment with its sentiments.

While living in his new hermitage in Shikoku during the last year of his life,
Santōka wrote about the importance of poetry in his life:

I am pressed every day to meet the needs of life. I spent yesterday and
today concerned about whether I eat or not. Probably tomorrow, too—
no, it will be so until the day I die.

But every day, every night, I am writing. Even though I neither drink
nor eat, I never neglect writing. In other words, though my stomach is
empty I am able to write. Like the flow of water my poetic spirit bubbles
up and spills over. Living for me is the writing of poetry. Poetry is my
life.46

It was the one great consolation of his life that when all else failed him, when he
had hardly enough to eat, his physical strength broken, and his inability to come
to terms with life still plaguing him, he could still obtain much personal gratifica-
tion through his poetry.

45 Ōyama, Teihon, p. 98.  
Notes written by Santōka in October 1930.
Death

It may be appropriate to conclude this study of Santōka’s life and work by examining his preoccupation and fascination with death. Death held great attraction for him as the final solution to his search for harmony with existence. Yet his several suicide attempts were all abortive, because his disaffection with life was tempered by his fear of what he believed was the finality of death.

In his study on Santōka, Kaneko Tōta observes that Santōka’s life was one of ‘stoic decadence’, resulting from his lack of value in life and lack of initiative toward death. Santōka spent his life in endless dissection of his own character, searching for ‘realities’ and inner truths that served little purpose except to further castigate his own restless soul.47

After 1924, when he failed in his bid to get run over by a train and then entered the priesthood, Santōka seemed to have decided that the end of his life was not to be achieved by a positive act, and thus in a passive sense he came to accept the fact that his life was for the time being to continue. Like a man standing on a bridge trying to summon up the courage to jump into a river, he finally realized that it was not in him to make the leap, but that the energy he had consumed in the effort had made it impossible for him to return to the safety of dry land. In 1934 he wrote in the postscript to his collection Sankō Suikō:

I am now prepared to try to start out again, to re-acknowledge the ‘world of existence’. I am reluctant to say whether that is good or bad; I only know that it comes neither from so-called resignation nor from what could be termed enlightenment.48

What it did mean was that Santōka had tentatively accepted life but that at least indirectly, through extending his physical and mental powers of endurance to their limits, he would continue to keep his options open for leaving this world. He would not personally take the final plunge, but would lay himself bare before the forces of life and death in the hope that death would have no difficulty in snatching him away.

His attraction to death, and the loneliness of his search for death, is a frequent theme in his poems.

Again the autumn rains?  
Death has yet to come.

In the face of death,  
a cool wind.

Even the ring of the wind chimes,  
the approach of death.

47 Kaneko, pp. 49–50.  
48 Ōyama, Teihon, p. 62.
The sound of the waves fading out, flowing in, my life draws to its close.
The rain falls, the sun shines, I search for a place to die.
If this were to be my deathplace. . .
The grass grows deeper and deeper. The quietness of death, clear-skied, leafless tree.
The sound of raindrops, I have become old.

As he became old, his unsettled way of life came to tax his physical strength more and more. The cold autumn rain penetrated his tired body and for perhaps the first time made death a reality to be directly confronted. But death still eluded him. On his last pilgrimage through Shikoku in 1939, he wrote:

I cannot seem to die, on the other bank a red flower blooms.

The red flower (higanbana) is associated with higan, literally ‘the other bank’, the equinoctial week in which Buddhists pray for the souls of the dead, and Santōka sees there the beautiful flower which is still beyond his grasp.

He wanted above all to accept death as easily as the flowers and the insects followed their natural course of growth and decay.

This plant which at any time may die, blossoms and bears fruit.
I plant a tree seed, the fruit will someday die.
Peacefully, possessing the power of death, grass is withering.
This is the dance of the butterflies before death.

The Japanese for ‘nirvana’ is jakumetsu, the two Chinese characters of which translate as ‘solitude’ and ‘annihilation’. In an analogous way, Santōka defined salvation as the destruction of an overactive ego that had isolated him from the
natural order. He sought to merge his spirit with the universal process of the flower or the butterfly, for which to wither or to die was a natural act of no intrinsic difference from to blossom or to dance.

Yet in the end his efforts at self-annihilation did little more than accentuate the tenacity of his ego and his great distance from salvation. After struggling with his soul for year after year, he died in October 1940, no more settled, no more sober, and no more at peace with himself than when he began his odyssey of purification some fourteen years earlier.

That Santōka suffered is undeniable. That this suffering was motivated more by a masochistic cycle of dissipation and punishing acts of repentance than by the quest of some noble ideal is equally true. But Santōka also had a wonderful capacity to celebrate the joys and sorrows of life, the pure mountain waters, the fragile spring blossoms, the heights and depths of sake, the smell and taste of cooked rice, and most of all the warmth of human friendship. As a testimony to these emotions, his poetry is certainly worthy of attention.

* * *

Recent Publications on Santōka

伊藤完吾・荻原井泉水編，山頭火を語る。潮文社，1972.
金子光太，長田山頭火，講談社，1975.
丸谷栄一，横崎れ，講談社，1975.
大山澄太，俳人山頭火の生涯，弥生書房，1971.
大山澄太編，山頭火著作集，巻1-4，潮文社。
1. あの山越えて，1969.
2. この道をゆく，1969.

大山澄太，山頭火の宿，弥生書房，1976.
大山澄太編，其中日記・山頭火，巻1-4，アポロ社，1958.
大山澄太編，定本種田山頭火句句，弥生書房，1971.
上田都史，俳人山頭火，潮文社，1976.
上田都史，井泉春・放哉・山頭火，永田書房，1974.