

Santōka Taneda: Four lessons about time

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Maeda Sensei, dear Organizing Committee, dear classmates and guests.

It is customary to say thanks at this point to everyone. But I have known Maeda Sensei for a while now, and I think our real thanks are not expressed from a podium, but from every brushstroke we write at home, at work, on the beach, as we practice, practice, practice. Our gratitude is our work. So, I already know I am not doing enough.

But I do appreciate the opportunity to share with you four short lessons about time, that I take from the haiku of Santōka Taneda, as they relate to calligraphy.

I: The now and the future

分け入つても分け入つても 青い山 – *Wakeittemo wakeittemo aoi yama.*

Pushing on, pushing on – blue mountains.

When we encounter ShoDō as novices, we see black (or orange) shapes on a white plane, and we do our best to make our writing look like the model, copying the appearance in two dimensions. However, two dimensions, that is not the view of the calligrapher. When we are a little more experienced, our attention turns from the shape that we are writing, to the tip of the brush, moving it in and out, and thinking about the brush adds another dimension: we are now writing in three dimensions: up and down, left and right, in and out. However, three dimensions, that is not the view of the calligrapher. Then, over time, we begin to appreciate that some strokes need to be slow, but deliberate, pushing the ink into the texture of the paper, some strokes skim over the paper, leaving ripples of ink in their wake. The fast and slow, the movement and stillness in the process, this add the dimension of time. There is no

calligraphy without time - the time to write, and the timing of the writing! Time truly is the fourth dimension in our work. However, four dimensions, that is not the view of the calligrapher.

When Nakagomi Sensei visited us in 2012 and gave a demonstration at the exhibition here – some of you will remember – he was asked: Sensei, what do you think when you write a character? And he answered: I think of the end of the paper. Nakagomi Sensei’s response is, I think, the view of the calligrapher. Of course, calligraphy cannot be done without rhythm, without position and height of the brush, without understanding the meaning, without considering the ink, the paper – but in the end, none of that makes the writing, all of that needs to be forgotten in the actual instant of writing. Writing a character is a gesture in time that is taken out of time, governed only by the end of the paper. This is the lesson I take from Santoka: however much I push along, the present moment will not bring me closer to the future. I find myself struggling with my practice, and while the practice moves me along in the landscape, actually claiming I would get somewhere would be like saying ShoDō has an end, a limit, a boundary at which you can arrive – in fact there is only the edge of the paper. I move along – and the mountains move along with me. *Wakeittemo wakeittemo aoi yama*. Pushing on, pushing on – blue mountains.

II: The present and the past

雪降る一人一人行く – *Yuki furu. Hitori hitori yuku.*

Snow is falling. One by one they go.

Santōka Taneda lived and worked a hundred years ago, and he is considered a pioneer of “free-form haiku”. I am always touched by the timelessness of his work, in which he describes moments – that naturally spread into the distant past and the uncertain future. It occurred to me to try carving this particular haiku as a seal stamp - and thus emphasizing its timelessness. But the first hurdle I needed to face is how to convert the contemporary Japanese into Kanji that I could write in the old style of seal carving, that was designed when Hiragana did not exist. Most of you probably know this – but when writing flowed from China to Japan in the 6th century, it wasn’t actually suitable to write Japanese at all! Chinese has no plurals, and no real past tense, and no possessive forms and no polite forms, and no cases – but Japanese has a lot of them and they are very important. Thus the monks who adapted Chinese Kanji to write Japanese had to invent a way to express the additional syllables and particles

that the Japanese language has but that simply don't exist in Chinese: they invented the Man'yōgana. These are Kanji, but their purpose is not to express a concept, but to make a particular sound. Over time, these Man'yōgana developed into the Hiragana we use today, but if we look back a thousand years, they were the same as other Kanji - and they have seal-script forms. This makes a way to write modern Japanese in seal script. So I translated the hiragana into fitting Manyogana and started designing the stamp. Then my next question was what stone to use. I had happened to find a stone on Hanlan's beach on the Toronto Island that I liked. It is a fair bit harder than the stone we normally carve with, but it is a fossil limestone. One thing you should know about limestone is that it does not come from the depths of the earth, it is created at the bottom of an ocean by little white seashells that drift down into the deep, forming a blanket of white calcium carbonate, and then crystallizing under pressure, and over time. What a fortunate convergence. This stone is 450 million years old – that's an inconceivable amount of time, and that's how long ago these shells were alive – until they drifted like snowflakes into the deep water, one by one, passed, and became extinct. *Yuki furu. Hitori hitori yuku.* Snow is falling. One by one they go.

III: Duration and pause

音はしぐれか – *Oto wa shigure ka?*

Listen. A drizzle?.

Shigure is a soft rain of late autumn, a drizzle, not a downpour. How could you hear it, even if you had the ears of a fox? What should you listen for at the edge of perception? I think what you hear is not the sound – but its absence, the way it dulls the clanking of distant machines, how it softens voices on the street, how it takes the edge off the siren of an ambulance and how it stills the buzz of traffic. It creates a space in the sounds around us that makes the rain become present as absence. We students of ShoDō, know about the importance of space between the lines, the white of the paper that is just as important as the black, and how absence speaks as vividly as presence. But this little lesson by Santōka also extends to time, the time we spend with the brush and the paper: it reminds me not to be trapped in ceaseless activity – “mindless” practice, if you will – but to allow pauses for contemplation, pauses that create a space in which the spirit of what we are doing can appear. *Oto wa ----- shigure ka?* Listen. A drizzle?

IV: Doing and being

歩きつつ ける彼岸花咲きつつ ける

Aruki tsuzukeru. Higanbana sakitsuzukeru.

Walking on and on. Stygian lilies, blooming on and on.

Santōka spent 14 years between 1926 and 1940 alone, walking, as a beggar-monk, meandering through central and southern Japan, with only brief interruptions, walking incessantly, walking on and on. This haiku takes two ideas – *aruki tsuzukeru* the ceaseless activity of walking, and *saki tsuzukeru* - the state of blooming on and on, and pivots them on a flower: the “red spider lily” (彼岸花, Higanbana). The spider lily is a common sight in Japan in autumn and has rich cultural connotations: it is at the same time beautiful, a vibrant red fringe around the golden rice fields, but it is also a deadly poison, and furthermore, a traditional tribute to the dead. Literally, these are “flowers [花, hana] from the other shore [彼岸, higan]”, and the shore is that of the Sanzu River [三途の川, sanzū no kawa] which is the boundary between this life and the afterlife of the Japanese Buddhist tradition. Now we have one side of this equation on the “*shigan*” (this shore), the space of our present, the space of walking and doing. And the other side is on the “*higan*” (the other shore) this is the space of being, the space without action, and as such blooming is not something the flower does, it is a manifestation of its existence, it is what the flower is. But is that really different? Santōka’s walking is often purposeless, for him, it is a mode of life and a form of poetry by itself. His life is not sustainable without walking, while walking, everything can become poetry. **The purpose of this walking is not to move through space, but to move through time. The purpose of this walking is not to move through space, but to move through time.** In its purposelessness, walking becomes being and that’s what I take from this lesson by Santōka: calligraphy, I might strive for *manabi tsuzukeru* - 学びつつ ける – studying on and on, a natural part of everyday life – not with a particular goal in mind, perhaps not even thinking about why I am practicing but having ShoDō inhabit my day – like coffee in the morning, making my bed, or eating an afternoon snack. This would mean not to do calligraphy, but to be. *Aruki tsuzukeru. Higanbana sakitsuzukeru.* Walking on and on. Stygian lilies, blooming on and on.

Thank you for your time, listening to these four short lessons. I hope that one day I will understand them.