

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

The Haiku Mind: Issa and Pure Land Buddhism

DAVID G. LANOUE

IN THE SEVENTH MONTH of 1812, haiku poet Kobayashi Issa 小林一茶 (1763–1828) wrote a verse about a paulownia leaf falling from a tree:

One paulownia leaf
how wonderful!
it falls westward
kiri hito ha / totemo no koto ni / saihō e
きり一葉 とてもの事に 西方へ¹

The fact that the leaf falls to the west is, according to Issa, “preferable” (*totemo no koto ni*). And why is this? Why is it so important that the leaf is drifting to the west instead of to the east, north or south? The answer is found in Shin Buddhism, to which Issa was fervently devoted and which provided the spiritual framework for his poetic universe. The leaf happens to be falling, dying, in the direction of Amida Buddha’s Pure Land, the Western Paradise, and this, Issa suggests, is lucky and wonderful.

What is this Pure Land, this Western Paradise, that Issa invokes so often in his poetry? Is it a physical place, a myth, a hope, a metaphor? And where is it to be found? In the literal west, or in the heart of the devotee, here and now, in this world? A look at several of his haiku should provide some answers.

On a purely symbolic level, the west has always suggested, across cultures, notions of death, of passing from this world to the next: the ending of life with the sunset and, perhaps—following the sun—a promise of rebirth. The ancient Egyptians thought this way about the west. Sunset

¹ *Issa zenshū* (hereafter abbreviated as *IZ*), vol. 3, p. 181.

was seen as the start of a subterranean spiritual journey that, if navigated successfully, would lead the soul to resurrection and bliss among the stars. Such is the journey described in the *Amduat* or *Book of the Secret Chamber* and other funerary texts.²

Symbolically, then, it makes excellent sense to find the Paradise of Amida in the west. In the Tantric Buddhist tradition, Amida's Pure Land serves as the cosmic counterpart to Akṣobhya's lesser-known Eastern Pure Land, called Abhirati. But Abhirati is almost insignificant, culturally, when compared to the Western Paradise of Amida in terms of its power to inspire the popular imagination. Devotion to Amida, the Buddha of Boundless Light and Eternal Life, spread from Northern India, across Central Asia, and into China and Japan. In all these places, Amida's Pure Land came to be for millions of people a compelling spiritual idea and longed-for destination.

According to the Pure Land Buddhist vision of the universe, we live in an age of depravity and self-interested calculation: the Latter Days of the Dharma or *mappō* 末法. In such corrupt circumstances, Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1262) teaches, one cannot achieve enlightenment by one's own efforts or "self-power" (*jiriki* 自力). However, if one relies utterly in the saving vow of Amida—to rescue sentient beings by enabling their rebirth in the Western Paradise—then he or she, although sinful, will attain enlightenment. As Shinran explains in the *Shōshin nenbutsu ge* 正信念仏偈, a hymn contained in his seminal work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō* 教行信証; faith in Amida's "Other Power" (*tariki* 他力) makes it possible for each person to attain the Pure Land in this life and then fulfill the role of the compassionate bodhisattva, leading others to awareness. Shinran writes, "without fail they reach the land of immeasurable light and universally guide sentient beings to enlightenment."³

In another poem about plant life, Issa again evokes the west and Amida's Pure Land:

The duckweed too
 may have prayed . . .
 blooming in the west
ukikusa mo / negai aru yara / nishi ni saku
 浮草も 願ひ有やら 西にさく⁴

² Abt 2003.

³ *The Collected Works of Shinran* (hereafter abbreviated as CWS), vol. 1, p. 72.

⁴ IZ, vol. 3, p. 162.

The duckweed perhaps has made a “wish,” a “petition,” a “prayer” (*negai*). The fact that it is blooming in the west, to Issa, suggests that the duckweed, like the poet himself, has prayed to Amida and yearns for rebirth in the Pure Land.

Issa continues to explore the imagery and implications of Shin Buddhism in other haiku, like the following:

To the west
 cherry blossoms scatter . . .
 Amida’s Honganji
nishi e chiru / sakura ya Mida no / Honganji
 西へちる さくらやみだの 本願寺⁵

When Issa composed this particular haiku, early in the ninth month of 1822, he was paying visits to some of his students in Naganuma 長沼, a village in his home province of Shinano, present-day Nagano Prefecture—and so the poem must be either a memory or a pure invention. In fact, in his journal he prefaces it with the head-note, “Spring”—underscoring the fact that this haiku, composed in autumn, does not pretend to depict a scene that the poet could have witnessed at the time.

While Issa here refers to a temple called Honganji, the symbolic resonance of this term is more significant than his reference to an existing temple. The name Honganji derives from the “Causal Vow” (*hongan*) of Amida Buddha, who promised to rescue all who trust in his saving grace. The cherry blossoms scattering to the west, to death, have no recourse but to trust in Amida’s Vow. In a related haiku, Issa states the case more explicitly:

“Simply trust!”
 cherry blossoms fall pit-a-pat
 in that way
tada tanome / sakura bota-bota / ano tōri
 ただ頼 桜ぼたぼた あの通り⁶

Two prescripts emphasize the Buddhist theme of this poem. It first appears in one of Issa’s journals under the head-note, “Kōzōji” 高蔵寺, and Issa recopies it years later with the note, “Kannon hōnō” 観音奉納 (An oblation to Kannon

⁵ IZ, vol. 4, p. 399.

⁶ IZ, vol. 2, p. 569.

[bodhisattva of compassion]). Since everything in this world is transitory, one must cling not to worldly things but to Amida Buddha's saving Vow. The way to the Pure Land is "that way" (*ano tōri*): the way of cherry blossoms drifting to oblivion while faithfully trusting in the Buddha.

Issa's westward-traveling paulownia leaf, duckweed, and cherry blossoms can be interpreted, symbolically, as the embodiment of the poet's own desire for rebirth in the Pure Land. However, the leaf, duckweed, and blossoms are not *merely* symbols. In the poet's view, all living things, including plants, find themselves on the same cosmic pilgrimage toward enlightenment. In one of his poetic journals, *Oraga haru* おらが春, he asks rhetorically: "Will even trees, plants and the land one day become Buddhas?"—and answers his own question without hesitation: "They, too, will be born as Buddhas."⁷

In all of the examples so far, plants and animals move physically toward the Western Paradise, suggesting on a symbolic level that all living things in the universe are progressing to an eventual enlightenment. It is no surprise, then, to find that Issa depicts himself on the same journey:

The west lies
 on the other shore
 of the road to Zenkōji
nishi kata wa / Zenkōji michi no / higan kana
 西方は 善光寺道の ひがんで⁸

Zenkōji is a major Buddhist temple in Issa's home province. In this haiku, the road leading to it goes, happily, west. The time of the spring equinox, referred to as *higan*, or "the other shore," in Japanese, is a time of renewal both in nature and in the human spirit. Here, Issa plays on this double meaning, seeing the westward way to Amida and the Pure Land. A famous image of Amida is enshrined at Zenkōji, to which pilgrims have flocked for centuries. Many of them enter the *kaidan meguri* 戒壇めぐり, the underground passage that runs beneath the altar and symbolizes spiritual death and resurrection. In this haiku, he beholds the road leading west to Zenkōji and Amida.

His spiritual goal is made perfectly clear in the following haiku:

⁷ IZ, vol. 6, p. 137.

⁸ IZ, vol. 3, p. 520.

Western mountains
 when I'm carried away
 which mist will I ride?
nishi yama ya / onore ga noru wa / dono kasumi
 西山や おのれがのるは どのかすみ⁹

He whimsically refers to the mist as a sort of conveyance that will carry him one day, he hopes, to Amida's Western Paradise, calling to mind Buddhist paintings in which Amida appears surrounded by saints riding clouds of mist. Many such images, referred to as "Yamagoe no Amida zu" 山越阿弥陀図 (Amida coming over the mountains [to meet the dying]), have been painted in Japan since the middle of the Heian period (794–1185). The haiku is both spiritual and comic. One senses that Issa's yearning for rebirth in the Pure Land is sincere, yet at the same time he makes a little joke about it, pretending to wonder which particular billow of spring mist might serve as his personal magic carpet.

In the next example, he explicitly identifies the west with Amida's Pure Land:

To the west
 is the road to the Buddha's Paradise . . .
 a withered field
saihō wa / Gokuraku michi yo / kare no hara
 西方は 極楽道よ かれのはら¹⁰

Like cherry blossoms falling off their branches, withered fields symbolize the passing of life—and the need to trust in Amida Buddha's Other Power. This haiku, in my opinion, is one of Issa's best. Gazing west, he sees a field of dead winter grass—a dreary sight by itself, but when coupled with the notion of the Western Paradise, the image is infused with quiet faith and unspoken hope. A verse about a falling leaf evokes a similar idea and feeling:

Dying to the beat
 of the nenbutsu . . .
 one leaf falls
nenbutsu ni / hyōshi no tsukishi / hito ha kana
 念仏に 拍子のつきし 一葉哉¹¹

⁹ IZ, vol. 3, p. 218.

¹⁰ IZ, vol. 4, p. 82.

¹¹ IZ, vol. 3, p. 181.

The phrase, “one leaf” (*hito ha*), specifically denotes a paulownia leaf in the shorthand of haiku, and so once again, as in our first example, Issa connects the fall of a paulownia leaf to Amida Buddha’s saving power. In fact, he wrote both of these haiku about falling paulownia leaves back-to-back on the same page of his poetic diary, *Shichiban nikki* 七番日記; this one was written first. The prayer being chanted is the nenbutsu: “Namu Amida Butsu” (“I bow to Amida Buddha!” or “I rely on Amida Buddha!”). Different followers of Jōdo Shinshū bring different levels of understanding to the nenbutsu. For many people of sincere but perhaps simplistic faith, the nenbutsu is a request for rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land: a sort of mantra or magic formula that, if repeated often enough, ensures one a happy next life in Paradise. The Tendai 天台 monk Genshin 源信 (942–1017) fires up the popular imagination in his work, *Ōjōyōshū* 往生要集 (Collection on the Essentials for Birth in the Pure Land), in which he paints a portrait of Amida’s Pure Land as a true land of bliss. The new arrival to the Western Paradise, Genshin promises, is welcomed by a multitude of saints and endowed with a radiant new body blessed with the supernatural powers of a Buddha. Embraced by Bodhisattva Kannon, seated on a lotus throne, the new arrival is showered with unimaginable spiritual pleasures and everlasting enjoyment.¹² For ordinary people, the Paradise painted by Genshin seems to be enough, an end in itself; they forget that the Pure Land is a place where one’s main business is to progress toward, and achieve, Nirvana.

Issa rejects the popular appreciation of the nenbutsu as a prayer of request to be granted physical rebirth in the sumptuous Paradise described by Genshin. In Issa’s poetic journal, *Oraga haru*, he writes, “People who try with all their might to rely on Other Power, saying ‘Other-Power faith,’ ‘Other-Power faith,’ end up binding themselves with ropes of Other-Powered faith, falling into the blaze of their self-power Hell.”¹³ Here, Issa criticizes Buddhists who unwittingly bind themselves all the more tightly to the ego and its calculations. If people regard the nenbutsu as a magic formula or even as a prayer of request, they are condemning themselves to the “self-power Hell.” They are not trusting utterly in the Other Power of Amida, since they believe that they are exercising some sort of control over their progress toward enlightenment simply by saying the nenbutsu. Issa’s criticism of such people clearly echoes Shinran’s teaching. According to Shinran, following

¹² Tsunoda 1958, vol. 1, p. 195.

¹³ IZ, vol. 6, p. 156.

Buddhist precepts cannot earn one's rebirth in the Pure Land, because this involves self-powered action tainted by egoism. The answer is not self-action but trusting in Amida's Vow. Issa agrees: "The one great matter of the coming life is to throw oneself before the Buddha and, whether Paradise or Hell, simply ask that he do as he will according to his working."¹⁴ In accordance with the teaching of Shinran, Issa recommends that one should leave the business of one's rebirth in the Pure Land strictly in the hands of Amida Buddha. The *nenbutsu*, in this light, is a prayer of thanksgiving for, and submission to, Amida Buddha's saving power. A paulownia leaf falling from the tree to the beat of the *nenbutsu*, drifting to the ground as if purposely following the rhythm of the prayer, is a poetic image brimming with spiritual hope. Death is not the end, as long as one trusts in the Power beyond conscious calculation that the *nenbutsu* celebrates.

In two haiku of 1821, written back-to-back in his poetic journal *Hachiban nikki* 八番日記, Issa suggests that even a snake can and should trust in Amida's Other Power:

In this world you're a snake—
 enter the hole
 toward Buddha's west!
kono yo koso / hebi nare nishi no / ana ni iru
 此世こそ 蛇なれ西の 穴に入¹⁵

The old snake
 toward the Western Paradise
 enters his hole
furu hebi ya / haya saihō no / ana ni iru
 古蛇や はや西方の 穴に入¹⁶

In the first haiku the phrase, *nishi no ana*, literally denotes "the western hole," but in my English translation I render it, "the hole toward Buddha's west." I do this to make explicit for English readers the religious association that should be obvious to most Japanese readers of Issa. I add the same helpful information in my translation of the second haiku, so that "western" (*saihō*) becomes "toward the Western Paradise." In both poems, the snake

¹⁴ IZ, vol. 6, p. 156.

¹⁵ IZ, vol. 4, p. 210.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

is slithering in the proper direction for rebirth in the Pure Land—a funny image that has an underlying, serious meaning.

Because of Issa's love for humor, readers can miss the serious messages that lurk within his silliest haiku. For this reason, when *Oraga haru* was published posthumously in 1851, Hyōkai Shisanjin 瓢界四山人 (n.d.) felt compelled to explain in a postscript, “This book, a manuscript by Shinano Province's Haiku Priest Issa, is written in a joking style and is like the work of Du Fu 杜甫 [712–770] for our times. Though it has a bit of jest in it, it visits well the way of Buddhism.”¹⁷ “Priest Issa” uses his “joking style” to reveal truths of life and Buddhism. While it may seem funny to contemplate the promise of the Pure Land in the image of a snake entering its hole in autumn, this is exactly Issa's point.

He applies his joking style in other haiku that evoke the theme of Amida's Western Paradise:

No westward facing
pissing tonight . . .
bright moon
nishi muite / shōben mo senu / tsuki yo kana
西向て 小便もせぬ 月よ哉¹⁸

This blessing
not allowed in Paradise . . .
new sake
Gokuraku ni / ikanu kahō ya / kotoshi sake
極楽に 行かぬ果報や ことし酒¹⁹

The first haiku has the prescript, “Suizanken” 水山蹇, a sign in the *I ching* 易經 (Book of Divinations). The description of this sign begins, “Beneficial direction southwest, non-beneficial, northeast.” According to this head-note, then, Issa faces northeast as he relieves himself. He purposely avoids urinating toward the west and Amida's Pure Land. In this way, he shows his reverence for Amida and the Western Paradise in a silly poem.

In the second example of applying his joking style to serious matters, Issa refers to “new sake,” an autumn season word. Since drinking alcohol

¹⁷ IZ, vol. 6, p. 157.

¹⁸ IZ, vol. 2, p. 143.

¹⁹ IZ, vol. 4, p. 396.

violates the Buddhist precept to refrain from intoxicants, Issa suspects that this “blessing” (*kahō*) will not be allowed in Paradise. While still living in this world, however, he is more than glad to enjoy his sake, manifesting a healthy disdain for precept-following that reminds us of the founder of Jōdo Shinshū. Shinran declares in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* that the “karmic evil” of sinners will “turn into merit” if they leap aboard the ship of Amida’s Vow: “Thus, when one has boarded the ship of the Vow of great compassion and sailed out on the vast ocean of light, the winds of perfect virtue blow softly and the waves of evil are transformed. The darkness of ignorance is immediately broken through, and quickly reaching the land of immeasurable light, one realizes great nirvana.”²⁰ So, if drinking sake is a “sin,” Issa is unconcerned. Like Shinran, he knows that everyone sins; that obeying rules and precepts is not the path to the Pure Land; that the only way is to trust in Amida Buddha’s “Vow of great compassion.” Even in a humorous haiku, then, “Priest Issa” expresses a deep insight into Pure Land faith.

In another comic haiku, he once again blends the sacred and the profane:

After winter prayers
right away . . .
a trip to Yoshiwara
jūya kara / sugu ni Yoshiwara / mairi kana
十夜から 直に吉原 参り哉²¹

Here, the term “*jūya*” refers to a religious observance held every year in the tenth month of the old Japanese calendar, in which the faithful would gather at temples to chant the nenbutsu for ten consecutive nights. In the poem, a man (perhaps Issa) goes directly from a temple after the end of these services to Yoshiwara, the licensed brothel district near Edo. Issa thus depicts two pilgrimages to two quite different Paradises. First, there is the pilgrimage to a temple to praise Amida Buddha’s Vow and the promise of the Pure Land, followed immediately by a more worldly pilgrimage to the “floating world” of pleasure, Yoshiwara. To readers unfamiliar with Shinran’s teaching, the haiku shines a light on human hypocrisy: on a would-be Buddha indulging in the desires of the flesh. This is not, however, Issa’s message. The poet, who understood Shinran’s teaching well, presents the “profane” trip to Yoshiwara as simply the natural thing to do after

²⁰ CWS, vol. 1, p. 56.

²¹ IZ, vol. 4, p. 503.

the “sacred” trip to the temple. No one is without sin, greed or selfish calculation. But if one has experienced the nenbutsu as a faith-filled song of thanks to, and reliance on, Amida Buddha, then one knows that visiting prostitutes in Yoshiwara has absolutely no bearing on one’s journey to the Pure Land.

So far, we have seen that Issa alludes to the Pure Land often in his haiku. What we have not considered, yet, is how he conceptualizes this Pure Land: as an actual place or a place in the heart? Is Issa’s Western Paradise physical or metaphorical? Can one attain it here and now, in this lifetime, or must one wait for death and rebirth?

Since Issa does not directly address this question in his prose, the answer, if one is to be found, must be sought in his poetry. In the next two examples, we see that he presents the Pure Land as surprisingly nearby and tangible, infiltrating *this* world—in a bush warbler’s singing and a cool summer breeze blowing:

A bush warbler sings—
 the east gate
 of Amida’s Pure Land
uguisu ya / Mida no jōdo no / higashi kado
 鶯や 弥陀の浄土の 東門²²

Cool breeze—
 through the window
 Pure Land Paradise!
suzukaze no / mado ga Gokuraku / jōdo kana
 涼風の 窓が極楽 浄土哉²³

Amida’s Pure Land is located in the west, and so its “east gate” (*higashi kado*) would naturally be the nearest one to this world, i.e., its entrance. The bush warbler seems to coax the listener to that entrance, into that Paradise, here and now. Issa prefaces this haiku with the head-note, Tennōji 天王寺. It is interesting that his melodious encounter with the Pure Land in this world takes place at a Buddhist temple. Paradise is evoked not by a priest’s sermon or a group of devotees chanting the nenbutsu but instead by an experience of nature in the form of a warbling bush warbler. Similarly, in the second

²² IZ, vol. 4, p. 105.

²³ Ibid., p. 175.

haiku, a cool breeze in summertime seems to sweep the Pure Land physically into Issa's window. Are these two images simply poetic exaggeration, or is Issa making a subtle point about the Pure Land and its availability to people in *this* life? Is he suggesting that birdsong and breezes can evoke a state of consciousness identical to that enjoyed by Amida's saints in the Western Paradise?

In each of these examples (bush warbler and cool breeze), the trigger to the experience (or near-experience) of the Pure Land is not the nenbutsu or a priest's sermon or the contemplation of Amida Buddha's Vow; instead, seemingly ordinary forces of nature are at work. Does this mean that Issa shares the view of the English Romantic poets—contemporaries whom he did not know and who could not have known him—in finding a “divine” experience in nature? Just as many of the Romantics sought God in nature instead of in churches or dogma, Issa indeed seems to discover Amida's Pure Land in the contemplation of birds, wind and flowers. And this discovery is not a passing fancy, but a theme explored in dozens of poems. One of the most memorable and significant is the following:

In this world of blossoms
nobody longs
for the west
hana no yo ni / nishi no nozomi wa / nakari keru
花の世に 西の望は なかりけり²⁴

In the shorthand of haiku, “blossoms” (*hana*) can mean “cherry blossoms.” Immersed in the beauty of a world of blooming cherry trees, people do not long for Amida Buddha's Western Paradise, signified in the poem as, simply, “the west.” *This* world seems Paradise enough. Issa stresses this point in an even more rapturous poem:

Cherry trees blooming—
this corrupt world
is a Pure Land!
hana saite / shaba soku jikkō / jōdo kana
花咲て 娑婆則寂光 浄土哉²⁵

²⁴ IZ, vol. 4, p. 344.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 552.

Amida Buddha's Paradise is revealed when one opens one's heart to nature—looking, listening, and deeply appreciating. The false and corrupt world of *shaba* suddenly vanishes, revealing the true reality of *jakkō jōdo*, the Pure Land. Perhaps this is why Issa named himself “Priest Issa of Haiku Temple.”²⁶ As a haiku poet he is devoted not only to appreciating the moon and blossoms; their contemplation becomes for Issa a way of enlightenment.

This is a key point if we wish to understand the haiku of Issa. For him, Buddhism and poetry are one thing:

New spring
 Yatarō is reborn
 into Haiku Temple
haru tatsu ya / Yatarō aratame / Haikaiji
 春立や 弥太郎改め はいかい寺²⁷

This haiku, written in 1818, is a revision of the one that Issa composed a year earlier. In the original version, he ends with the phrase, “Priest Issa.”²⁸ His transformation from Kobayashi Yatarō, his given name, to “Priest Issa of Haiku Temple” might be overlooked as merely another example of the poet's humor and inventiveness, but I believe there is a deeper and more important meaning. Yatarō radically changes and improves to become Issa, just as the corrupt world of *mappō*, to a properly disposed mind, becomes Amida's Pure Land. These two transformations are intimately connected. Issa sees haiku as a religious practice, *shugyō* 修行. As a haiku poet, he opens himself to the here-and-now without craving, without grasping. He accepts the gifts of nature just as the devotee of Jōdo Shinshū gratefully accepts Amida's Causal Vow. Nature—or in the bigger picture, the universe—cannot be owned or controlled by human beings. The attitude of the poet of nature, an explorer of this universe, is one of humility and acceptance—setting aside ego calculations and accepting with open palms whatever nature and the universe deign to offer.

²⁶ He calls himself *Haikaiji Issa-bō* 俳諧寺一茶坊. *Haikai* refers to a broader range of traditional Japanese poetry, but for our purposes, can simply be translated as “haiku.”

²⁷ IZ, vol. 4, p. 88.

²⁸ IZ, vol. 3, p. 534.

To my open palms
 snowflakes flitting
 down
tenohira e / hara-hara yuki no / furi ni keru
 掌へ はらはら雪の 降りにけり²⁹

Issa accepts the snowflakes with reverence. In the moment of poetic and Buddhist insight (there is no difference between the two for Priest Issa), the Pure Land reveals itself here and now.

This is the proper context for understanding his haiku about Amida's Western Paradise. This world and Amida's Pure Land are the same place. One's consciousness is the determining factor. Plenty of people scatter among the cherry blossoms for picnics—drinking, eating, and gambling—without truly opening themselves to the beauty that surrounds and covers them. Issa notes this sad fact:

Fussing, fussing
 in the blossom shade . . .
 gamblers
koe-goe ni / hana no kokage no / bakuchi kana
 声々に 花の木蔭の ばくち哉³⁰

Loud voices boom under the blooming cherry trees. Oblivious to the Pure Land that is so near yet unattainable due to their selfish focus on the game and winning money at the expense of others, the gamblers argue and shout. Issa places the head-note “Angry Demons” (*shura* 修羅) over this haiku, using it in a six-poem series on the “Six Ways” (*rokudō* 六道): the six possible realms of existence, according to traditional Buddhist cosmology. Being reborn as an angry demon is an unhappy existence, marked with anger, strife and violence. Issa implies in his haiku that one need not wait for the next life to become such a creature.

In parallel fashion, one need not wait for death to enter the Pure Land. He writes in *Oraga haru*, “One need not strain to raise one's voice, reciting the nenbutsu—for the Buddha deigns to protect us even if we do not wish for it. This is called great peace of spirit in our tradition.”³¹ This “great peace of

²⁹ IZ, vol. 3, p. 204.

³⁰ IZ, vol. 9, p. 223.

³¹ IZ, vol. 6, p. 157.

spirit” or *anjin* 安心 is a consequence of opening one’s self to Amida Buddha’s protection or Causal Vow. Issa seems to enjoy the same peace of spirit when he opens himself in a non-grasping way to the gifts of the universe. Just as Shinran taught that the devotee of Jōdo Shinshū must put on the “mind of faith” (*shinjin* 信心) to realize the Pure Land, in parallel fashion Priest Issa puts on what I would call the “mind of haiku” when he opens himself to the universe, experiencing a paradise of which the self-absorbed gamblers under the cherry blossoms are unaware.

Issa’s poetic exploration of the universe in terms of his Pure Land faith began early in his career and remained an important concern throughout. Here is an early example from 1793, when he was thirty-one.

Winter seclusion—
 cooking a chicken
 praising Buddha
fuyugomori / tori ryōri ni mo / nebutsu kana
 冬籠り 鳥料理にも 念仏哉³²

The cook is reciting the *nenbutsu* (shortened here to “*nebutsu*” to fit the 5-7-5 syllable pattern of haiku). The Buddhist in the scene is performing the very un-Buddhist action of taking a life. If his *nenbutsu* is not sincere, if it is being recited with the mind of selfishness rather than the “mind of faith,” it would be callow and hypocritical. However, there is another way to view the scene. Perhaps the cook feels truly sympathetic for the chicken, and sorry for the sin he is committing. Perhaps the cook knows the teaching of Shinran on the topic of sin: that all of us are imperfect, all of us sin, and if we trust in Amida’s Vow, receiving it with the mind of faith, even we can reach the Pure Land; even we can become Buddhas. How did Issa view the scene? I have a hunch that he saw the cook in both ways—as a shallow Buddhist misapplying the *nenbutsu* and as a mature Buddhist sincerely invoking Amida’s Vow to lift him from this world of carnage and sin. He leaves the scene purposely ambiguous to invite the reader to contemplate both possibilities, and to reflect: Which kind of Buddhist am I?

Buddhism for Issa is a daily struggle. But every now and then, he puts on his haiku mind and finds a happy confirmation that he is on a good path.

³² IZ, vol. 2, p. 62.

A cicada chirrs—
 my shadow's umbrella-hat
 makes a halo!
higurashi ya / waga kageboshi no / Amida-gasa
 日ぐらしや 我影法師の あみだ笠³³

The *higurashi* is a type of cicada that in the evening sings a richly modulated song. While ordinary cicadas are associated with summer, *higurashi* is an autumn season word in haiku. Issa listens to the elegant song somewhere in the trees, and then, looking down, sees in his own shadow an “Amida umbrella-hat” (*Amida-gasa*), an old expression that denotes a halo. The poet is delighted to see in his shadow the blessing of an unexpected halo, added to the blessing of cicada song. The image is both funny and profound: funny because Issa devotes much ink in his journals to describing his own sinfulness; and yet profound, too, in that it reminds us that even sinners, thanks to Amida Buddha’s grace, can become Buddhas. Even Issa!

Sin and faith, this corrupt world and the Western Paradise, are surprisingly close to each other. One needs to deeply acknowledge his or her sinfulness and recognize that by his or her own power it is impossible to achieve enlightenment. Only then can one put on the “mind of faith,” as Shinran describes it. Unlike the Christian vision of Hell as a realm found deep in the earth, far below the celestial Heaven, the Buddhist Issa sees Heaven and Hell side-by-side, neighbors:

In the Hell painting
 perched on a fence . . .
 a lark sings
jigoku e no / kaki ni kakarite / naku hibari
 地獄画の 垣にかかりて 鳴雲雀³⁴

Stanford M. Forrester, a haiku poet, editor and Pure Land Buddhist, submitted the following comment on this poem to my “Haiku of Kobayashi Issa” website:³⁵ “I believe, but am not sure, that Heaven and Hell are both in the Pure Land. Each one of us creates our own Heaven and Hell. I think that was what Shinran generally said. Here is my guess without seeing the

³³ IZ, vol. 1, p. 540.

³⁴ IZ, vol. 3, p. 353.

³⁵ <http://haikuguy.com/issa/>.

painting. . . Fences are dividers, and though the fence is in Hell it must be dividing one area or realm from another. The lark who sings might function as a reminder that even in Hell there is a Pure Land and it is up to us to decide which side of the fence to be on. The lark calls to us to become enlightened. The lark is Amida Buddha.” Another visitor to the website, Nakamura Sakuo, observes, “In springtime with a singing lark we feel as if we are in Paradise. Looking at this painting of Hell, in which a lark is sitting on a fence, we realize that a lark could sing in Heaven as well as in Hell. We realize the uncertainty of life.” And a third visitor to the website, Ōgawa Shinji, sees the lark as not actually in the painting, but rather as a “symbol of joy” that Issa, the optimist, added in.

Forrester, Nakamura and Ōgawa bring diverse and interesting perspectives to this haiku. The lark represents an optimism, purity and joy that one does not expect to find in Hell. If we open ourselves to its song, open ourselves to Amida Buddha’s saving Vow, then Hell ceases to exist. It is just a question of spiritual attitude and consciousness, as we have already seen in this previously quoted haiku:

Cherry trees blooming—
 this corrupt world
 is a Pure Land!
hana saite / shaba soku jakkō / jōdo kana
 花咲て 娑婆即寂光 浄土哉³⁶

The blossoms, of course, are ephemeral. They will soon flutter off their branches. So, is Issa therefore devoting himself to a temporary Pure Land? This is an important question, because one can easily arrive at false conclusions about his statement on the transformative power of cherry blossoms. Issa is not worshipping the blossoms. In fact, when he sees them in bloom he is deeply aware of how temporary, how precious their fragile beauty is. In this regard he is in complete agreement with Yoshida Kenkō 吉田兼好 (1283–1350), an essayist of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, who writes, “If man were never to fade away like the dew of Adashino 化野, never to vanish like the smoke over Toribeyama 鳥辺山, but lingered on forever in the world, how things would lose their power to move us!”³⁷ The cherry blossoms have the power to move us *because*

³⁶ IZ, vol. 4, p. 552.

³⁷ Yoshida 1967, p. 7.

they are temporary—as are we and every other living being. As such, the blossoms provide a window into the Buddhist teaching on transience. Moreover, when Issa opens his heart to them—when he sees them with an attitude of grateful acceptance, his “haiku mind”—their contemplation triggers a stunning discovery of the Pure Land, here and now. In this way, Issa’s “haiku mind” is quite similar, if not identical, to Shinran’s “mind of faith.”

Nature, if viewed with acceptance and not with an egocentric agenda to exploit or control it, communicates the truths of Buddhism—Issa believes.

The morning dew
 teaches the way . . .
 to the Pure Land
asa tsuyu ni / jōdo mairi no / keiko kana
 朝露に 浄土参りの けいこ哉³⁸

Like cherry blossoms, dewdrops are a conventional literary symbol for the Buddhist truth of transience. Dewdrops evaporating in the morning sun embody a “lesson” (*keiko*), a silent sermon that is more eloquent than anything a priest might say in a temple or on a roadside. Nothing abides in this ever-shifting, transformative universe. But if we truly open our hearts and minds to such moments of transformation, if we attend to them the way that Issa does, we can learn something about the universe and our true situation in it. Issa’s mission as a haiku poet thus parallels that of a bodhisattva who has realized the Pure Land but “returns” to the world of defilement—in other words, to the world of craving and passion in which most humans remain trapped like our angry-demon gamblers. He returns to show us the eastern gate to Amida’s Paradise in the song of a bush warbler. Issa attends to nature’s moments, learns from them, and then shares with us, in his haiku, the deep lessons gleaned: All things pass. Do not cling to the unreal. Simply trust in “Namu Amida Butsu”!

The journey west for “Priest Issa of Haiku Temple” is, fundamentally, a journey to the present moment. He appreciates each and every encounter with the universe—with cherry blossoms and paulownia leaves, fireflies and snakes, snowflakes and dewdrops—with sincerity, openness, gentleness, and not an ounce of greed or ego-calculation. He devotes himself, his art and

³⁸ IZ, vol. 3, p. 255.

his life, to this world's blossoms *and* to Amida. He sees no contradiction in this, and indeed there is none because of the way he approaches the universe of blooms and Amida Buddha's Vow.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CWS Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga and Ryushin Uryuzu, trans., *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 2 vols. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997.
- IZ Kobayashi Issa 小林一茶, *Issa zenshū* 一茶全集, ed. Shinano Kyōiku Kai 信濃教育会, 9 vols. Nagano: Shinano Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1976–79.

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