
ESSAYS

BECOMING A CHILD: ISSA'S POETIC CONSCIOUSNESS¹

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In First Month of 1797, thirty-five year-old Kobayashi Issa was in Matsuyama City, nearing the end of a long visit to the Japanese island of Shikoku. The leading poet of that city, forty-nine year-old Kurita Chodō, invited his younger counterpart to compose a thirty-six verse *kasen renku* with him. It was to be the sixth and last *kasen* that the two poets would write together. Since Chodō had made the *hokku* or starting verse for the previous *renku* earlier that month, it was Issa's turn to lead off, which he did in the following way:

正月の子供に成て見たき哉 (1797)²
shōgatsu no kodomo ni natte mitaki kana

becoming a child
on New Year's Day...
I wish!

New Year's Day, the first day of spring in the old Japanese calendar, was the most propitious day of the year. It evoked for people of Issa's era notions of youth, vernal regeneration, and buoyant optimism. It furthermore inspired religious devotion for the native gods whose shrines they visited, along with deep, patriotic feeling at the outset of a new imperial year. In fact, the day was also every citizen's birthday, since on New Year's Day everyone gained a year in age. The image of returning to a state of childhood serves as a powerful and fitting symbol for the rapture of such

a day. While one might read Issa's hokku as merely wishful fantasy—to partake of the pleasures of the New Year's season, from tasty rice cakes to bright-colored kites, with the innocent, wide-eyed enthusiasm of a child—it can also possibly be read as a sincere, serious intention. In fact, I hope to show in this essay that becoming a child served as a controlling idea in Issa's poetry and may explain, more than any other single factor, his greatness as a poet.

The idea of becoming a child isn't absurd if one considers the difference between child and adult to be more a difference in consciousness rather than in chronological age. Neuroscientists have attributed the transition from infant to adult consciousness to the development of a "Default-Mode Network" (DMN) in the human brain: crucial regions that receive more blood flow and consume more energy than other regions. Researcher Robin Carhart-Harris, in a 2014 study, equates these centers with Freud's concept of ego, a person's metacognitive sense of self. Whereas infants enjoy what Carhart-Harris calls pre-ego or "primary consciousness," this mode of awareness is gradually replaced by the DMN as a person matures. The DMN works to minimize surprise and uncertainty, and as a result much of one's sensory experience is screened out and raw emotions are suppressed, resulting in a state of consciousness that has contributed much to the survival of the human species but at a high price. Carhart-Harris notes that the achievement of ego in the adult mind is at the cost of "emotional lability" as well as "our ability to think flexibly, and our ability to value nature" (Pollan 49).

Issa envisioned his mission as a haiku poet to value nature with a flexible mind and nonjudgmental, primordial perception and feeling—in other words, with a state of consciousness that Carhart-Harris describes as primary. Sadly, most adults, due to their well-developed, rigid egos, rush past nature's treasures without truly attending to them, without really seeing, feeling, and coming to know them. Issa's hokku of 1797 might be read as a one-breath manifesto calling for a return to a different, earlier state of consciousness: once again to perceive and feel with child-like openness the world's infinite surprises.

Ironically perhaps, Issa most likely came to value the child's perspective through some quite grown-up reading of foundational texts of Buddhism

and of the Taoism that infused itself into Buddhist tradition when that tradition passed through China, en route to Japan and other East Asian countries. In *Tao De Jing*, Laozi (Lao Tzu) praises unspoiled nature, such that a block of wood that no one has yet carved into a shape serves as a metaphor for the sage who remains in touch with his or her authentic way or *dao*. Laozi also praises, fittingly, the spontaneous energy of babies.

One possessing virtue may be compared to an infant.

.....

Though weak in bones and soft in muscles,
his hold is firm;
Though ignorant of union, his instrument is turgid.
This is supreme energy.
Crying all day without turning hoarse,
This is supreme harmony. (Li 121)

The baby (a male in Laozi's example) cries all day without getting hoarse because he simply follows his nature without struggling against it. His mind is not yet shackled with limitations imposed by the adult ego; neurologically, he enjoys what Carhart-Harris calls primary consciousness, and such consciousness, Laozi suggests, enables a life of more authentic virtue than that lived by so-called "educated" adults. Issa, well-read in the Chinese classics, must have been familiar with the writings of Laozi, known as Rōshi in Japan. In any case, he certainly knew and followed Jōdoshinshū Pure Land Buddhism, whose founder Shinran teaches that innocent, pure-hearted trust—a virtue associated with children—represents the pinnacle of Buddhist devotion. Issa's decision to learn (more accurately, unlearn) from children can thus be understood as a reasonable option within the spiritual tradition of Taoist-influenced Buddhism.

At a recent meeting of the Haiku Society of America, Stanford M. Forrester noted that Jack Kerouac, a pioneer of English-language haiku, understood childlike consciousness to be essential in the process of composing such poetry. In *Dharma Bums*, for example, Kerouac's first-person narrator observes, "Walking in this country you could understand the perfect gems of haikus the Oriental poets had written, never getting

drunk in the mountains or anything but just going along as fresh as children writing down what they saw without literary devices or fanciness of expression” (59). Many poets have followed Kerouac’s path of “going along as fresh as children” in their creation of haiku, stifling as much as possible grownup thoughts of literary fanciness. In fact, I would argue that the best haiku poets in our time, without exception, write in this way. A close examination of Issa’s respect for and emulation of children places into sharper focus the Japanese cultural and philosophical precedents for this crucial element in contemporary haiku.

In one of his poetic diaries, *Oraga haru* (1819), Issa writes admiringly about his infant daughter, Sato.

I believe this child lives in a special state of grace, and enjoys divine protection from Buddha. For when the evening comes when once a year we hold a memorial service for the dead, and I have lit the candles on the family altar, and rung the bell for prayer, she crawls out swiftly, wherever she may be, and softly folds her tiny hands, like little bracken sprouts, and says her prayers in such a sweet, small voice—in such a lovely way! For myself, I am old enough that my hair is touched with frost, and every year adds waves of wrinkles to my brow, yet so far I have not found grace with Buddha, and waste my days and months in meaningless activity. I am ashamed to think my child, who is only two years old, is closer to the truth than I. (Yuasa 94)

Though in his translation of this passage Nobuyuki Yuasa refers generically to Buddha, Sato’s prayer is “Nanmu Nanmu”: a baby’s simplified and somewhat slurred version of the nembutsu prayer, “Namu Amida Butsu” (“All Praise to Amida Buddha!”). Furthermore, Issa’s comment that he has not yet “found grace with Buddha” refers specifically, in his original text, to the grace of Amida Buddha (Issa Zenshū 6.148). As a follower of Jōdoshinshū, the popular Pure Land Buddhist sect founded in the thirteenth century by Shinran, Issa believed it to be impossible, in this depraved age, for one to earn one’s rebirth in Amida’s Pure Land by meditation, asceticism, good works, or following Buddha’s precepts. Such self-powered efforts (*jiriki*) are doomed to fail in our corrupt time due to the tainting influence of self-interested calculations in the service of ego: the

Default-Mode Network described by neuroscientists. If enlightenment requires surrendering the fiction of the ego, any ego-powered method to reach it, Shinran reasoned, couldn't possibly work. For Shinran, the ideal candidate for rebirth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land and subsequent enlightenment is not a clever or educated person, but—as D. T. Suzuki has pointed out—a simple, innocently faithful believer who trusts without question the “other power” (*tariki*) of Amida Buddha. In Issa's religion (and/or philosophy, depending on how one conceives of Buddhism), a pure-hearted child is thus closer to enlightenment than a self-interested, obsessively calculating adult—which is why Issa idealized not just children in his haiku but “innocent” animals as well.

立秋もしらぬ童が仏哉 (1814; IZ 1.430)
tatsu aki mo shiranu warabe ga hotoke kana

not knowing that
 autumn's begun, a child
 Buddha!

けさ秋としらぬ狗が仏哉 (1820; IZ 1.430)
kesa aki to shiranu enoko ga hotoke kana

not knowing that
 autumn's begun, puppy
 Buddha!

In these twin haiku Issa plays with the Japanese expression, “know-nothing Buddha” (*shiranu ga hotoke*), which signifies, “Ignorance is bliss.” In the context of Pure Land Buddhism, however, the cliché acquires an added layer of meaning. The puppy and the child are spiritually advanced not despite their ignorance of autumn's beginning but because of it. They revel innocently in the present moment without anxiety about autumn, loss, or the inevitable end of things. They are not Buddhists but Buddhas, and as such, Issa suggests, their way of being in the world is worth emulating.³

Issa's own childhood, because of the death of his mother when he was just three and his father's subsequent marriage to a cold-hearted stepmother, was marked by deep sorrow. His later experiences with children of his own, the first four of whom died young, was also famously painful. Nevertheless, a majority of his haiku about children are upbeat celebrations of their innocence, spontaneity, imaginations, and energy. A representative example is perhaps his most famous portrait of childhood, and suggests how an adult poet might return to a state of primary consciousness in order to become, in his heart and imagination at least, a child again.

雪とけて村一ぱいの子ども哉 (1814; IZ 1.95)
yuki tokete mura ippai no kodomo kana

snow melting
 the village brimming over ...
 with children!

Kai Falkman cites this poem as an illustration of “the mechanism of surprise in haiku” (38). The first phrase provides an image of melting snow, and the second suggests a possible dire consequence: the village is “full” (*ippai*). Is it perhaps flooded? The third phrase, however, ends with a twist and a surprise: the village is flooded ... with children! After setting up the reader with the image of snow melting and a village brimming over, Issa immediately delivers his punch line: “children!” (*kodomo kana*). The children of the village have been cooped up in their homes during the long, cold winter. Now, as snow finally liquefies under the springtime sun, they burst outside from their confinement, “flooding” the village: shouting, playing, laughing. Issa opens his senses, heart, and mind to the depths of the moment. The resulting poem is not a labored-upon product of calculation, not dressed up in what Kerouac described as “fanciness.” Instead, it evokes, simply and spontaneously, a childlike state of freedom and joy.

Three years later, in 1817, Issa conjures a similar scene of youthful spontaneity and energy.

大根で叩きあふたる子ども哉 (1817; IZ 1.726)
daikon de tataki autaru kodomo kana

a battle royal
 with radishes ...
 children

Little samurai wield large radishes (*daikon*) in their rollicking battle. Not pictured in the poem, but implied, are the children's parents: grownup farmers stooping in the field, pulling up radishes. The children's lively creative play contrasts with the dull drudgery of the adults. The reader needn't guess where Issa's deepest sympathies lie. Once again, his haiku style of uncontrived simplicity perfectly matches his subject matter and intimates that, in terms of consciousness, the poet is tapping into that of his inner child, and inviting his readers to do the same.

In several of his haiku portraits of children, Issa suggests that a child's perspective is instructive.

迷子のしっかり掴むさくら哉 (1814; IZ 1.229)
mayoigo no shikkari tsukamu sakura kana

the lost child
 clutches them tightly ...
 cherry blossoms⁴

The poem evokes deep and conflicting emotions. At first, the reader may feel pity for the lost child, but upon further reflection, pity may give way to an "Aha!" moment. The child isn't crying for his (or her) mother. Instead, he clings to a branch of cherry blossoms. Perhaps he isn't even worried about being lost; the flowers are so lovely, such a prize to hold! When one views the haiku in this light, the child's attitude reveals a lesson for Issa's adult readers. One shouldn't fret about the future but instead should pay attention to the exquisite beauty of this world, here and now: relax the Default Mode Network's grip and appreciate nature as all of us once did when we were small.

Two haiku about a child tied to a tree, which in Issa's day was a form of "time out" punishment for naughtiness, similarly focus on innocent openness to nature.

わんぱくや縛れながらよぶ蛍 (1816; IZ 1.360)
wanpaku ya shibarare nagara yobu hotaru

naughty child
 though tethered calling
 fireflies

わんぱくや縛れながら夕涼 (1816; IZ 1.323)
wanpaku ya shibare nagara yūsuzumi

naughty child
 though tethered enjoys
 evening's cool

In both poems, the child is physically tied but free in his heart and mind. Adult readers of Issa, in his time and today, were and are tied invisibly to jobs and to all the daily worry that responsibility imposes, hence unable or too busy to call out to fireflies or revel in the pleasurable feeling of cool air on a summer evening. The naughty child, therefore, has something important to teach adults.

Issa's lost and tethered children appear closer to nature than the majority of their elders, just as Issa believed his baby daughter Sato was closer than he to Amida Buddha and enlightenment. In the poet's mind, the advantage that children enjoy over most adults is their openness: to nature and to Buddha's grace. Following their example, Issa suggests, represents a huge step not only toward a deeper appreciation of nature but also toward rebirth in the Pure Land and enlightenment.

Issa's journals are filled with haiku that reiterate the theme of valuing and emulating child consciousness. For the purpose of this essay, a last example will suffice.

しら露としらぬ子どもが仏かな (1822; IZ 1.483)
shira tsuyu to shiranu kodomo ga hotoke kana

the child unaware
of the silver dewdrops
a Buddha

As noted earlier, “Know-Nothing Buddha” (*shiranu ga hotoke*) is an idiom for “Ignorance is bliss.” Once again, Issa slyly transforms and subverts the cliché, suggesting that the child is indeed a Buddha, not simply metaphorically ignorant—just as an American poet today is free to use the expression, “When pigs fly,” to convey the image of pigs actually flying, not merely to signify an abstract “Never.” The dewdrops in the haiku carry special meaning in the context of Buddhism, for they are a conventional symbol in Japanese literature for Gautama Buddha’s understanding of transience as a root cause of suffering: everything in the universe and the universe itself, like dewdrops evaporating in the morning sun, must pass away. The lucky child is indeed both ignorant and blissful, for he or she is unaware of the temporary nature of the universe, just as the child in an earlier example was unaware of autumn’s start and all that the season implies. The innocence of a child (or a puppy) entails for Issa a state of consciousness conducive to enlightenment, an ancient idea traceable back to Laozi’s *Dao De Jing*.

In 1797, at the beginning of his poetic career, Kobayashi Issa expressed in the starting verse of a renku the wish to become a child on New Year’s Day. For the next thirty years, following a spiritually informed approach to haiku, he fulfilled his wish. Adults can become children if they try, and this, Issa shows us, is a good thing.

NOTES

- ¹. In an earlier essay, I related the preferable mode of consciousness for writing haiku to “right brain,” holistic thinking as opposed to logical, linear “left brain” cogitation (“The Poetic ‘Ah!’: Haiku and the Right Brain”). The present essay continues this exploration in light of a new opposition posited by brain research: “primary consciousness” versus the “Default-Mode Network.”
- ². Kobayashi Issa, *Issa zenshū* (Nagano: Shinano Mainichi Shimbunsha, 1979) 5.219. All texts from Issa are from the nine-volume *Issa zenshū* (hereafter IZ). Here and henceforth, English translations of Japanese are my own unless otherwise designated.
- ³. See my book, *Pure Land Haiku: The Art of Priest Issa* 113.
- ⁴. In an earlier haiku (1810), a child clutches plum blossoms tightly (IZ 1.195). By making the child lost in the haiku of 1814, Issa adds emotional power to the poem.

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