

Jump, Flea! Renku as Game, Ritual, and Art

Is Japanese linked verse—traditionally referred to as *renga* but today more commonly called *renku*—a game, a ritual, and/or a work of poetic art? It begs to be understood as all three. As a literary game, *renku* follows an elaborate set of rules established in medieval times and refined by poets of later periods. As ritual, every *renku*—of whatever length—is a Buddhist ritual, whereby its participants and readers contemplate transience, reject the trap of repetition and rebirth while they travel, in their imaginations, through a Mandala of All Creation—representative of the illusory universe—and arrive, in the end (if successful) at an experience of enlightenment. And as art, a *renku* is a poem but a poem like none other, for it is the collective expression of poets who together create a string of verses that no individual could possibly have created: an art form that forever remains inseparable from its players, its rules of game, Buddhism, and a long history of players who lived before, of games played before, and of Japanese cultural and literary tradition from folk songs to Noh.

A 36-verse *kasen renku* composed two hundred years ago, in 1819, by Edo period *haikai* poet, Kobayashi Issa, and a partner who wrote under the penname of Kibō, provides an illuminating example of how the performance of *renku* merges game, ritual, and art. *Renku* is indeed a language-game, in that its players follow a strict set of rules, handed down by its founders. However, as Gary Ebersole argues in an important essay published in the *Eastern Buddhist*, all of these rules are only the superficial expressions of a deeper structure, and that structure has a ritualistic function.¹ He claims that Japanese linked verse, originally a mere pastime for the elite, was transformed by Buddhist poet-priests to become a serious means by which both participants and their readers might realize and gain insight into worldly transience. These priests, whom Ebersole describes as *tonseisha* (wanderers and hermits who had withdrawn from the world), belonged to no particular school or temple; however, they might be viewed as precursors to Pure Land Buddhists in their belief in the “magico-religious efficacy” of words, relating *renku* to the recitation of sutras and *dharani* (mantras).² I agree with Ebersole that *renku* as a ritual teaches Buddhist transience, but I propose that it furthermore serves three additional purposes: it

¹ Gary L. Ebersole, “The Buddhist Ritual Use of Linked Poetry in Medieval Japan”. *The Eastern Buddhist* 16.2 (Autumn 1983): 50-71.

² Ebersole, 57, 59.

reinforces the doctrine of avoiding *rinne* (the Japanese way of expressing the Buddhist principle of samsara, the cycle of birth and death which binds souls to a world of suffering); it encourages the contemplation of a Mandala of All Creation, a comprehensive model of the universe created for the specific purpose of learning how to transcend it; and, I will argue, in the climactic final verses of every renku—the blossom verse followed by the last verse—participants and their readers are invited to experience enlightenment. The first point, that renku invites a realization and spiritual appreciation of transience, Ebersole explains very well; I'll recap his main points, drawing examples from the Issa-Kibō *kasen* of 1819. For the second and third functions of renku—how it promotes *rinne*-avoidance and embodies a symbolic journey through the universe as charted in the Mandala of All Creation, I will rely on insights gleaned from interviews with contemporary renku master, Shokan Tadashi Kondo. And for the final ritualistic function of renku—how its climactic blossom verse might point one toward enlightenment—I will propose my own theory.

Ebersole maintains that renku structure involves a continuous creation of scenes and, as the poem moves forward, the obliteration of those scenes. Here is how it works. Renku is a chain of a three-phrase verse (of 5-7-5 Japanese sound units) followed by a two-phrase verse (7-7), followed by another three-phrase verse, and so on. Together, the first pair of back-to-back verses comprises a distinct waka poem, in which the three-phrase part is imaginatively linked to the two-phrase part. But when the third verse of 5-7-5 is added, it links only *directly* to the 7-7 verse that immediately precedes it, thus creating a new five-phrase poem—as if a viewer of the first two panels of a folding screen landscape painting takes a step to the right and now is allowed only to focus on screens two and three. The first screen slowly fades from consciousness, and the artist makes sure not purposefully to remind viewers of that earlier image. This obligatory extinction of the past in renku construction prevents the development of any single controlling theme, which is precisely why some Western critics disdain the form. Some American poets, in fact, have experimented with new, renku-like, linked poems written on a single theme (for example, the rengay format), but in doing so, they eradicate the ritual and wisdom of renku. To stick with one theme is to deny a vital first principle of Buddhism: don't cling to the transitory!

Let's apply Ebersole's thesis—that renku is a spiritual exercise of contemplating transience—by taking a look at the 1819 linked verse poem by Issa and Kibō. The latter was the proprietor of a hot spring spa located in Kawahara, a town in Issa's home province of Shinano. Issa supplied the first verse, the *hokku*. The *hokku*, ancestor of today's haiku, is a special verse that contains a strong internal break. No other 5-7-5 verse of a renku has such a break. In this way, a *hokku* functions like a miniature renku: one phrase of five sound units is grammatically cut away from, yet links forward to, a second phrase of twelve sound units; or else (alternatively) a first phrase of twelve sound units is separated from, while linking forward to, a phrase of five sound units. If, as I will argue later, renku is a fractal representation of the universe of experience, its *hokku* is a fractal representation of the renku (hence, also, of the universe of experience).

Issa's *hokku* begins with the phrase: “jump flea!” (蚤飛べよ).³³ After the grammatical break signalled by the particle *yo*—which in English can be represented by an exclamation mark—he continues with the rest of his opening verse: “might as well be/ onto a lotus” (おなじ事なら蓮の上). The season is summer, and Issa provides two summer season words: “flea” and “lotus”, i.e., “lotus blossom”. Issa filled his poetic journals with potential *hokku*. In his time, the term “haiku” didn't yet exist (Shiki would provide that later, in the Western-leaning Meiji period), and poets didn't yet think of their 5-7-5 verses as stand-alone works of art: ends unto themselves. So Issa's notebook was a storehouse of possible *hokku* for starting the ritual game of renku. And of all the potential first verses that he wrote in his life—well over twenty thousand—this is one of his most ideal renku-starters. If renku is an imaginative journey through an ephemeral world, undertaken for the express purpose of ultimately annihilating and escaping from that world, this *hokku* is perfect. It starts with a graphic image of *this* world: a flea hopping, presumably off the poet's body or clothing. But then, in the linking phrase, Issa encourages it to hop onto a lotus blossom, signifying enlightenment. In Mahayana Buddhism, the lotus represents purity growing from murky water: *from* it but not *of* it. For a Pure Land Buddhist like Issa, a flea jumping onto a lotus blossom is symbolically realizing his own most deeply desired, most devout aspiration: to be reborn in Amida's Pure

³³ Issa copies this verse with a slightly different first phrase in his *Hachiban nikki* (‘Eighth Diary’) in an entry for Sixth Month, 1819; and in *Oraga haru* (‘My Spring’), his poetic journal for that year.

Land and, once there, to achieve enlightenment. Even a flea, Issa suggests, can become a Buddha . . . which gives him and should give us all hope.⁴

Kibō answers the *hokku* thusly: “so cool on a straw mat/ watching the sunset moon” (すずみ筵に入相の月). Following the rules of game/ritual, Kibō continues with the summer season in this verse, referring to the coolness of a summer dusk: much-savoured relief after the heat of day. He moves directly and boldly to the important moon verse (which normally appears later in a *kasen renku*, at position 14). The person sitting on the straw mat contemplates the moon which, like the lotus, symbolizes otherworldly purity. Together, the two verses with their juxtaposing images create a 5-7-5-7-7 *waka*:

jump flea!	<i>nomi tobe yo</i>
might as well be	<i>onaji koto nara</i>
onto a lotus –	<i>hasu no ue</i>
so cool on a straw mat	<i>susumi mushiro ni</i>
watching the sunset moon	<i>iriai no tsuki</i>

But now, with the following third verse—the so-called *daisan*—the game really begins to get interesting. In this unusual *renku*, the two poets did not choose simply to take turns. If they had done so, Issa would have written all the three-phrase verses, and Kibō all the two-phrase verses. Instead, from this point on, each poet writes two verses back-to-back—which means Kibō goes next, answering his own verse of “cooling off on a straw mat/ watching the sunset moon” with the following three-phrase *daisan*: “how old was Sōtan/ when the mountain/ went bald?” (宗旦がいくつの年に山はげて). Sōtan would have been well-known to Issa and Kibō’s original readers: a tea master and grandson of the great master of tea ceremony, Rikyū. The link (that is, the connecting idea or image) from the second verse (*waki*) to the third verse (*daisan*) is visual and humorous. The shape of the moon reminds one of a bald man’s head, which in turn evokes the image of a “bald”, treeless-at-the-top mountain.

At this point the first verse about a flea and a lotus should be fading from our consciousness. *That* panel of the folding screen

⁴ Issa experimented with this same symbolism of a flea leaping to Buddhist salvation in a haiku of seven years earlier, recorded in his *Shichiban nikki* (“Seventh Diary”) in Fifth Month: “a flea jumps/ in the Laughing Buddha’s/ mouth” (蚤とぶや笑仏の御口へ).

of the renku is no longer in view. Now, we see, focus on, and contemplate:

so cool on a straw mat	<i>susumi mushiro ni</i>
watching the sunset moon –	<i>iriai no tsuki</i>
how old was Sōtan	<i>sōtan ga</i>
when the mountain	<i>ikutsu no toshi ni</i>
went bald?	<i>yama hagete</i>

Ebersole notes that renku seeks “not to create meaning, but to abolish it.” With every two verses of every linked poem, “universes come into existence and disappear”.⁵ The poet-priests who designed this ritual, Ebersole argues, wanted to drive home for its participants and readers this all-important insight of Buddhism: that all is ephemeral. Every place, person, and thing embodies *mujō* (“impermanence”) – nothing abides.

This is the first ritual purpose of renku. Now, I would like to add to Ebersole’s analysis by drawing on two insights espoused by contemporary Japanese renku master and professor emeritus of Seikei University, Shokan Tadashi Kondo. The first is that renku embodies, thus teaches, an abhorrence of *rinne*: of karmic retrogression. Issa’s *hokku* plainly demonstrates *rinne*-avoidance. The flea is jumping anyway, so why *not* (Issa asks) aim for a soft landing on the lotus blossom? Since the blooming part of a lotus floats on the surface of water, the flea’s trajectory is a question of life or death. To miss the flower means to drown in worldliness: a death without enlightenment, a return to, not an escape from, this world’s mud. If one believes in reincarnation (as most Pure Land Buddhists in Issa’s time certainly did), the flea can symbolize someone doomed to be reborn in a corrupt world of suffering in a corrupt period: the age of the Latter Days of Dharma, *mappō*. Issa’s *hokku*, a microcosm of the entire renku that it introduces, advocates moving beyond this world and its vicious cycles of birth/rebirth. And for Buddhists who think of reincarnation more as a metaphor than an actuality, the message is the same: don’t slip backwards; don’t repeat the past. Simply and utterly trust in the Other Power (*tariki*) of Amida Buddha . . . and attain enlightenment.

As the first part of this essay concludes, for Buddhists who think of reincarnation more as a metaphor than an actuality, a key message conveyed in Issa and Kibō’s 1819 renku is: don’t slip backwards; don’t repeat the past. Simply and

⁵ Ebersole 67, 54.

utterly trust in the Other Power (*tariki*) of Amida Buddha . . . and attain enlightenment. This message of moving forward permeates their *renku* not by accident but by deep design, since this is a truth built into the ritual structure of every *renku*. For further illustration, let's consider verses 10 and 11 of their *renku*. This is a remarkable pairing. Kibō begins it with a summer setting: “wiping off sweat/ with an iris” (菖蒲の花で汗をふくなり). Under the hot sun, the person in the scene ironically appreciates only the utility of the iris, not its beauty. Kibō links to his own verse with another summer scene—actually a summer *sound*: the song of the *hototogisu* or cuckoo: “a room in Eguchi/ for just one night/ while a cuckoo sings” (一夜かせ江口の宿のほととぎす). The mentioning of Eguchi coupled with the expression “for just one night” is a complex allusion that would have been understood by literate people in Issa's time. Eguchi on the Kazaki River is a port town in the Osaka area. In a famous Noh play, Zeami includes an exchange of songs, both of which were written by his father, Kan'ami. A travelling monk (who, we can imagine, is that sweating person wiping himself with the iris in Kibō's preceding verse of the *renku*) arrives at Eguchi. He remembers a story about how, long ago, the poet-monk Saigyō arrived at this place and asked a courtesan for a room for the night. The monk in Zeami's play recites aloud Saigyō's lines, and a passing woman answers him by reciting the courtesan's lines: the so-called ‘harlot's song’. In it, she exclaims that staying at an inn for a night is in fact the human condition: “all things seen, / all things heard” are momentary and, if wrongfully clung to, create “the heart's confusion”. She concludes:

We set our heart
on passing shelter;
if we did not,
there would be no sad world,
no lovers to yearn.⁶

The woman singing these lines, of course, is the ghost of the long-ago courtesan who, in the original tale, reveals herself to be a manifestation of Fūgen Bosatsu (a bodhisattva known in Sanskrit as Samantabhadra). In the story, the courtesan rides a pleasure boat that transforms into a marvellous white

⁶ Trans. by Royall Tyler, ‘Buddhism in Noh’. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14.1 (March 1987): 19-52. The quotations appear on pp. 35-36.

elephant that lifts her into the sky, bound for a paradise beyond this world.

This Eguchi verse in the renku is, on the surface, a love verse, since it refers to a famous courtesan, but the full story of that courtesan-turned-bodhisattva charges the mundane reality of stopping at an inn with cosmic significance. The cuckoo singing outside one's window might suggest, in this context, divine melody, beckoning the lodger at the inn (and, metaphorically, all of us, who are lodgers in a temporary, fading world) to move forth toward transcendence and enlightenment: just climb onto the white elephant and fly away! Interestingly and not coincidentally, in *Oraga haru*, a *haibun* that Issa wrote in the same year of 1819, he connects the warbling of a bird with divine music.

This particular pairing of verses, 10 and 11, demonstrates renku master Shokan Tadashi Kondo's dictum that a renku should always push forward, without a backwards gaze, with the goal of transcending an illusory universe. Renku is a ritual not only intended to help its participants realize transience but also for them to understand the prize waiting for them if they manage to achieve this realization: enlightenment. To escape karmic repetition means to break free of the ego, specifically the ego's desire for self-gratification that keeps most human beings stuck in endless, pointless, repetitive, and ultimately unsatisfying cycles of worldliness.

Renku tradition has produced a list of recommended categories of experience along with a chart that dictates the number of verses that should pass before a category can be repeated. For example, a supernatural being (monster, ghost, goblin etc.) is such a striking image, it must never be repeated in a particular renku. Other specific areas of experience, though, can be repeated, as long as a prescribed number of verses has transpired since their last evocation—a rule of game that, according to Kondo, grew out of *rinne*-avoidance. Poets mustn't prompt their readers to turn their attention back to earlier images.

Many renku poets whom I have met in the West and in Japan follow the rules of renku only because they are rules. However, Kondo reminds us that these rules serve a deep, spiritual purpose, referring to the traditional, recommended categories of experience as a Mandala of All Creation. As a renku unfolds, as

many as possible of these diverse realms of experience should be visited. In traditional renku guides, such as the one co-authored by Issa renku expert Kengo Hotokebuchi, a chart indicates how many verses can repeat a category and how many verses should intervene before the re-appearance of a category.⁷ The rules expressed in conventional renku charts encourage a meandering exploration of life in the universe with restless forward momentum. For example, the first ten verses of Issa's and Kibō's renku swiftly visit the following realms of the Mandala of All Creation: (1) Animal Life + Plant Life + Summer, (2) Heavenly Body + Time of Day, (3) Mountain + The Past, (4) Famous Place, (5) Precipitation + Residence + Winter, (6) Human Life [occupation], (7) Heavenly Body + Time of Day, (8) Buddhism, (9) Human Life [child + food], and (10) Plant Life + Summer.

If we were to outline any properly written renku, we would find, though in different order, many of these same realms of experience and others. Thus, every renku, while superficially different, is actually the *same* work in its deep structure. To state the case in the linguistic terminology employed by Ferdinand de Saussure, the deep grammar of every renku (its *langue*) is always the same, whereas the articulation of that grammar in its verses (what de Saussure would call its *parole*) is, for every renku, completely different: an infinite set of possibilities. In this way, renku is like life. Every life, snowflake-like, is different, yet the deep structure of every life is the same: a journey from birth to death. Every renku is a ritualized journey through life itself, and every renku arrives at the same climax (though manifested in myriad ways in its surface expression): the penultimate blossom verse.

Every renku follows a three-part structure. In 36-verse *kasen*, the form favored by Bashō and generations of *haikai* poets who adored and emulated this seventeenth-century master, the Introduction (*Jō*) has six verses, the middle section or Body (*Ha*) has twenty-four verses, and the Conclusion (*Kyū*) has six. The proper mood for the final third part of a renku journey is peaceful and calm. This is appropriate; after all, Gautama Buddha sat quietly in the shade of the Bodhi tree when he achieved *his* enlightenment. Renku's calm finish thus serves a ritualistic purpose. As the Chinese Buddhist monk Quiguan Weixin famously said when describing his spiritual development,

⁷ Higashi Meiga, Hiroyuki Tange, and Kengo Hotokebuchi, *Jūshichi ki: renku, haiku kigo jiten* ('Seventeen Seasons: a Renku and Haiku Season Word Dictionary'). (Tokyo: Sanseido, 2007) 557.

at first, “mountains are mountains, and waters are waters”.⁸ This is the consciousness of a renku’s Introduction: innocent and accepting. Quigyuan Weixin’s second phase of spiritual growth came when he realized that “mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters”. A renku’s middle section plunges poets and their readers into a bewildering universe of interconnecting and mutually defining entities: plants, animals, seasons, sun, moon, monsters, mountains – none of which exist in and of themselves. Every “thing” arises as part of a complex, intersecting, and ever-shifting web of impermanent relationships. As the *Heart Sutra* teaches, “form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form”.⁹ No mountain, no body of water and, of course, no isolated, independent “self” exists. Quigyuan Weixin’s third phase corresponds with the concluding part of renku ritual. In the end, he tells us, “mountains are once more mountains, and waters are waters”. Renku’s concluding section aims at a similar insight. The penultimate verse always presents a blossom or blossoms. In the Buddhist aesthetic imagination of medieval Japan, when renku was invented, blossoms—especially spring blossoms and, of these, especially cherry blossoms—were understood to signify transience: *mujō*. Blossoms are glorious one day yet scatter to oblivion the next. This is a further lesson in perceiving transience, which (as noted in the first part of this essay) Gary L. Ebersole argues is a primary goal of renku ritual, but renku’s blossom ending does something more than merely remind us once again of impermanence.¹⁰ Blossoms, as we have seen in Issa’s *hokku* about the flea jumping on the lotus, typically symbolize enlightenment for Japanese Buddhists: in this muddy, defiled world, despite all its mud and depravity—here and now—enlightenment is within one’s reach. The medieval poet-priests who designed renku chose well when requiring the blossom ending. In Quigyuan Weixin’s third phase, describing his own experience of enlightenment, he says that he returned to a world of mountains and bodies of water, but not with his previous innocent view. He learned that there really are no mountains, no bodies of water, as independent entities. Like a generous and merciful bodhisattva, he returned to a fundamentally unreal world, but now wide awake. The hope

⁸ This quotation from Quigyuan Weixin and those that follow are from D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, First Series (London: Published for the Buddhist Society by Rider, 1926) 24.

⁹ Trans. by the Kwam Um School of Zen, ‘The Maha Prajna Paramita Hrdaya Sutra’. <http://static1.squarespace.com>. Accessed 10 March 2019.

¹⁰ Gary L. Ebersole, ‘The Buddhist Ritual Use of Linked Poetry in Medieval Japan’. *The Eastern Buddhist* 16.2 (Autumn 1983): 50-71.

woven into the ritual of renku is that everyone—its poets and its readers—might *wake up*.

Renku's blossom ending invites us both to contemplate and to realize something. We contemplate, one last time before our imaginative journey through the Mandala of All Creation ends, how ephemeral, like blossoms, every "thing"—ourselves included—has been and is. And we realize, deeply, how the splendour in all this glorious illusion of a universe, as indicated by the blossoms, is whispering to each of us that enlightenment is possible and attainable here and now, because it can be nowhere else.

Kibō wrote the blossom verse for the 1819 'Jump Flea' renku: "through yellow roses/ a path like a half-width/ kimono sash" (山吹に細帯ほどの道がつく). The narrow path through the roses, plainly, is the road to enlightenment, beckoning to us all. Issa answers this verse, and caps this remarkable renku with the hopeful words—also rife with symbolic import: "outside the window/ spring passes on" (窓の先から春は行くなり).

Renku constitutes at one end a seamless continuum of art—for it is skilfully constructed poetry—and, at the other end, Buddhist ritual. To borrow language philosopher J.L. Austin's term, renku is a performative language act: it does not just describe something; it *does* something. With representational art at one end of its continuum and performative ritual at its other, renku is never one or the other but always, necessarily, both. This is why renku has been so misunderstood in the West. Critics looking at it simply as a work of poetry, searching for a single, unifying theme, see renku as flawed art; they are missing the ritual side of the continuum.

In addition to being both art and ritual, renku is also a game—which invites us to consider another continuum. Games are played for fun, yet a ritual—especially one with the lofty goal of spiritual awakening—is serious business. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to conceive of renku as *only* serious business. It is also a game, and an entertaining one at that. The mood in a renku session is convivial and light. The poets, playing together, enjoy the experience—and in some sessions, they also enjoy rounds of sake. However, people who regard renku as *only* a game miss the big picture.

It's a game; it *is* fun, but its collaborating participants, guided by the Buddhist principles built into the structure of renku, also undertake a serious, imaginative journey that can potentially, ideally, lead to life-changing insight. This poem, this ritual, this game is nothing less than a search for life's deepest meaning.

Jump, flea!

David G. Lanoue