

## Liberative Haiku: an introduction



Beyond this introductory essay, this section comprises two previously published pieces ([Liberative Haiku](#) and [Zen and the Art of Haiku](#)], and concludes with a piece on [Nagata Koi](#), a challenging Zen haiku master who died in 1997.

A good starting place for understanding what I mean by liberative haiku is the incisive address given by Lee Gurga to the British Haiku Society conference of April 1998. He argues as follows:

Originally, many of the people in the States that were interested in haiku were so because they were interested in Japanese culture or the philosophy of Zen Buddhism as it was popularised there in the 1950s and '60s. I will characterize this group by saying that their primary interest in haiku was its use as a vehicle for spiritual development. To this end the group was greatly concerned with studying – and being inspired – by the great Japanese haiku masters, and this tradition produced “several haiku poets of a high level of accomplishment”. Their work was inspired more – or less - by Zen Buddhism, but only implicitly so, and lies rather within a much broader tradition of contemplative spirituality.

In the Japanese tradition itself relatively few come near to emphatically invoking Zen, as in this by Sodo (1641-1716):

in my hut this spring  
there is nothing  
there is everything

Here one of my favourites is by the great Kobayashi Issa (1762-1826), notwithstanding its touch of didacticism

in this life  
we walk on the roof of hell  
and view the flowers

Gurga's argument continues like this:

More recently ... it seems that [more people have come to haiku who are] more interested in experimenting with haiku as a vehicle for expressing their own thoughts than they are with experimenting with themselves in order to find out what haiku has to offer them. As a result, we have people writing minimalist poems, concrete poems, visual poems and word puzzles of various sorts and calling them haiku.

In other words, some people live to write haiku, but others write haiku to live. The latter existential poets write out of a need to share with their fellow human beings the root experience of our human condition. They feel in that condition, at bottom, a sense of lack, of unease and they offer their readers a feeling of release, of liberation however fleeting. As contemplatives from Julian of Norwich to T S Eliot have proclaimed, all things shall be well – life is somehow basically okay. Such poets have, in Goethe's words, something precious to share – "When man in his agony is dumb, we have God's gift to utter what all suffer".

This momentary revolution in our customary mode of experience has been described in a variety of similar ways. Here is the testimony of an Italian haiku poet, Pietro Tartamella (in an interview in *Modern Haiku* 42.3 Autumn 2011):-

For me a haiku is fine, [if] when reading and understanding it, I feel a kind of melancholy compassion, lyricism, simplicity and a sort of semantic upsetting that more or less overturns my point of view and brings about a destructuring,. Even if minimal ... The semantic expression produces that little light explosion that makes you feel enlightened.

What happens to create that kind of haiku experience ?I believe that the liberative haiku works to offer the reader a sense of "suchness", as it is called in Zen Buddhism (sono-mama in Japanese) . By this is meant a feeling of "just how it is", freed of our customary yearning, however, subtle, that it should be otherwise. This dynamic sense of "acceptance" lies at the heart of all contemplative spiritualities. This awakening was nicely described by Robert Speiss:

The haiku poet makes the familiar unfamiliar ... and yet in such a way [that] we exclaim 'Of course!'

What is it, then, that happens in a haiku to create this kind of experience?

I suggest that it is ultimately the resonance of the open metaphor that lies at the heart of every quality haiku. "Metaphor" because haiku are dedicated to "telling" through concrete imagery. The imagery evokes some wider feeling, experience, or truth. And, because of the open endedness of haiku, here there is always some potential for creative misreading, hovering between several possibilities – almost several possible poems... This enables each reader to adapt what the poet has offered to his or her own personality and situation, thereby widening the existential appeal.

In some very direct and deceptively simple liberative haiku the metaphor appears non-existent: the poem simply implies "that's how things are", as in these two by Basho and Buson respectively:

how cold  
leek tips  
washed white

the gleam  
of a new day  
on pilchard's head

"How things are" may be more dramatically proclaimed by vivid imagery, as in Basho's famous

shrieking plovers  
calling darkness  
around Hishizaki Cape

It is a commonplace layout in haiku to contrast two phrases in the second and third lines (after setting the scene in the first). Where the contrast is strong the third line "cuts" across the previous one; there is a *disjunction* of thought and feeling. With a talented poet this may strike a strong existential spark, as in this by Basho (where the disjunction occurs between the first and second lines):-

beyond serenity  
grey kites  
in twilight

Here we experience a suchness which carries us beyond mere words. Disjunction can be a very powerful device in liberative haiku, as explained by Robert Spiess (*A Year's Speculations on Haiku*, Modern Haiku Press, 1995):

In haiku the juxtaposition or "confrontation" of entities produces a tension charged with energy that generates an insight, intuition or felt-depth of an aspect of reality; it is a movement, a birth, that leads to a new level of awareness.

Disjunction is a device rich in possibilities. Here is a poem by Renée Owen where the suchness of the striking imagery gives a poignancy – and perhaps offers a catharsis – to the human longing.

The mottled browns  
of a wood thrush breast  
how long this longing?

A further and more controversial step for liberative haiku is to be found in so-called surreal haiku, a subject better explored in the [essay on Nagata Koi](#) elsewhere on this page. This one came to me on a precarious stroll this morning:-

shaky bridge  
this still day I cross the water  
on its steady shadow