

## Zen and the Art of Haiku

*"We know in our bones that there is something odd, something queer, about everything, and when this contradictoriness has a deep, religious, poetical quality, when the whole thing stands revealed and we see right through it to this side, we weep with uncontrollable joy, or laugh with irrepressible grief." - R.H. Blyth (1)*

What is it about haiku that imparts that mysterious little whiff of insight, so difficult to describe and yet so strangely satisfying? I would like to offer some pointers from my experience as a long term Zen Buddhist for whom the Way of haiku has become a valued part of my practice.

Characteristically we endeavour to secure and console our fragile self-identity by processing, shaping and colouring the raw experience of existence. Even -- or especially -- in the face of discouraging external circumstances, our mind strives to maximise the "feel good" factor both emotionally and intellectually, helped and amplified by a social culture which includes plenty of imaginative literature. The worst of this offers temporary escape from who we really are; the best offers a sometimes magnificent creative and cathartic treatment of our existential evasion. However, as 'imaginative' literature it remains ultimately subjective in the sense used by Blyth as "the state of mind in which a man looks at the outside world, or at himself, as he would like it to be (2). The example he quotes from Byron would be hard to beat:-

And Ardennes waves above them her green leaves,  
Dewy with nature's tear-drops as they pass,  
Grieving, if aught inanimate e'er grieves,  
Over the unreturning brave.

For Buddhism our root unease originates in the countless and subtle ways in which we try to evade, by action, thought and emotion, the totally open experience of just how it is and how we are. Trying to make it otherwise has been described as a lifelong lawsuit against reality, which we can never win. Spirituality itself, even Zen Buddhism, may be expropriated by the needy ego as the ultimate evasion. Here is a beautiful warning from the eighteenth century Zen Master Hakuin:-

At the north window, icy draughts whistle through the cracks,  
At the south pond, wild geese huddle in snowy reeds.  
Above, the mountain moon is pinched thin with cold,  
Freezing clouds threaten to plunge from the sky.  
Buddhas might descend to this world by the thousands,  
They couldn't add or subtract one thing (3)

Ultimately the only effective remedy is, in Blake's words, to learn to "cleanse the doors of perception" and let reality flood in. As all the spiritual traditions affirm, this brings a sense of joy and release and an ability to live more fully and freely in the world -- and in the moment. Zen is a school of Buddhism concerned with the cultivation of a profound down-to-earth awareness of this "suchness", unmediated by doctrine or other concepts. . Haiku are the most thoroughgoing expression of literary Zen. They are also one of the several meditative "Ways" (like calligraphy and the minimal ink paintings, 'zenga' and 'haiga') whose form both gives expression to insight and helps to deepen it. The "haiku moment" is thus no less than a tiny flash of an ultimate reality which in fact is just what is under our noses. Haiku which most clearly embody "suchness" as the ground of our being I shall, in the Blyth tradition, call "Zen haiku" and it is with these that I am particularly concerned. Exceptionally they may be quite didactic, like this from George Swede (which sums up the argument so far):

After the search for meaning  
bills in the mail

### **Empty of self-need**

It follows that haiku must spring from a mind open and unobstructed by any urge to make something of the reality that has come to the poet's attention. Those who go searching after haiku will find them shy and few and far between. Look for them and you will not find them. Don't look for them, and they are not to be found. Of subjective meddling the 13th century Zen Master Dogen observed, "*When the self withdraws the ten thousand things advance; when the self-advances, the ten thousand things withdraw*". And Basho advised that "*When composing a verse let there not be a hair's breadth separating your mind from what you write; composition of a poem must be done in an instant, like a woodcutter felling a huge tree or a swordsman leaping at a dangerous enemy*" (4).

Just washed  
how chill  
the white leeks!

Contrariwise, Bruce Ross identifies a "*tendency in the fourth generation of American haiku writers of the late seventies, eighties and early nineties unfortunately to frequently offer catchy moments of sensibility that often rely on obvious metaphoric figures. These American poets desire to create 'haiku moments'. But a subjective ego, call it sentiment or call it imagination, intrudes upon their perception of the object*" (5). Typical is the poem by Steve Sanfield quoted later in this paper in another context.

"How it is" doesn't come with meanings and explanations attached to give us the illusion of a more secure grip on it. Allusive brevity is one invariable characteristic of the haiku form. We have an itch to add in order -- as we fondly suppose -- to clarify. Too much verbiage muffles the spark; the shorter the poem the more space for the reader. And the reader, too, may have an itch to explain. Thirty long lines to kill three short ones! A haiku derails rationality; why try to put it back on the rails? Basho (through Lucien Stryk) makes the point:

Bird of time  
in Kyoto, pining  
for Kyoto

If haiku were no more than a reflection of how it is ("so what?") they would not engage our attention as they do. But they express how it is 'as experienced by a human being', 'within our shared humanity'. These two elements are precisely set out in this verse from the *Zenrinkushu* (6): "*Rain of no sorrow falls on banana leaves --- A man, hearing its pattering, feels his bowels cut*". Haiku, in Martin Lucas's words, are "open metaphors" for our human condition and resonate with that condition. They offer a glancing opportunity, without the poetic prompting of another, to accept for ourselves how it is. Such pure acceptance has qualities of compassion, release, quiet joy, subtle humour. It is well known to the mystics, like Julian of Norwich: "*All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well*". Haiku moments offer a little bit of existential therapy shared between writer and reader, a little bit of mutual compassion. In David Cobb's words they combine "*tender austerity and the mystery of clarity*". Of all literary forms haiku are, in the current telltale slang, the least "in your face"; they have the least "attitude". Indeed, they may leave us momentarily suspended in an emptiness which nevertheless feels authentic and moving, as with Shiki:

The long night  
a light passes along  
the shoji [screen]

At the other extreme the reader may just occasionally be prodded with a question, as in this example from Basho:

In the dense mist  
what is being shouted  
between hill and boat?

The sense of metaphor may be particularly strong when the poet has his own feelings in mind. In this example, old age is deeply felt by Shiseki. He acknowledges the self-pity that comes with it, but he does not massage this feeling with the any expressions of consolation:

My old thighs  
how thin  
by firelight

However, these "open metaphors" retain their power only so long as readers leave them open and do not hasten to fill them with their own meanings. R H Blyth warns: - "*Where Basho is at his greatest is where he seems most insignificant, the neck of a firefly, hailstones in the sun, the chirp of an insect.... --- these are full of meaning, interest, value, that is, poetry, but 'not as symbols of the Infinite, not as types of Eternity, but in themselves'*". Their meaning is just as direct, as clear, as unmistakable, as complete and perfect, as devoid of reference to other things, as dipping the hand suddenly into boiling water (7). Explicit symbolism narrows the metaphor, takes space from the reader and leadens the lightness. Some Japanese regard it as a peculiarly Western haiku vice, and it is very seductive, as in this from Scott Montgomery:

her silence at dinner  
sediment  
hanging in the wine

Traditionally haiku poets have taken nature as their subject matter, as being more contemplatively accessible. But when nature turns dramatic only the best haiku poets can both express the drama and retain the haiku spirit without tipping over into subjective melodrama. In such highly tuned haiku the translator also will be put to the test. Here are two examples from Basho, translated by Lucien Stryk, with all the dramatic down-to-earth energy of Zen:

Mogami river, yanking  
the burning sky  
into the sea

Shrieking plovers  
calling darkness  
around Hoshizaki Cape

Perhaps human affairs were assumed to be more likely to excite the poet's impulse to comment. But this is not necessarily so, as the growing number of "social haiku" bear witness. The left one is by an American, Donald McLeod, and the other, by Peter Finch, is from an industrially depressed Welsh valley:

Unemployment office  
a metal chairlight  
scrapes across linoleum

Through dense firs  
light of a wrecked car  
burning

## Varieties of Awareness

Classical Japanese literature at its best was characterised by a sense of depth (*fukami*) in pursuit of art as a "way" of personal realization – a religio-esthetic discipline. Undistorted by self-need, reality displays characteristics of transience and insubstantiality which, deeply experienced (as at times of lifetime crisis) may feel very threatening. Meditation enables a gradually prepared opening to them and joyful release from the lifetime effort of denying them at a deep existential level. Thus we may experience *muga* – so close an identification with the things one writes about that the self is forgotten. When "how it is" ("suchness", *sono-mama*) is "empty" of the weight of self-need we feel a sense of release, of lightness of spirit. This is the *karumi* experienced in miniature in haiku, many of which give intimations of this "emptiness". In some instances it may move us very deeply: *yugen* -- profound awareness to which we cannot put words. In Japanese culture certain mood responses, of elusive and overlapping meaning, have been identified. Unless appreciated in the spiritual context of Zen these easily become no more than haiku conventions or "values", or Japanese mannerisms. "Willow pattern haiku", haiku *à la Japonaise*, may result. Thus Bruce Ross refers to "the stylistically self-conscious underscoring of Zen-like experiences" to be found in many contemporary American haiku poets. (8)

*Sabi* is an acceptance of the "emptiness", insubstantiality and vulnerability of phenomena (including oneself). But it is an acceptance coloured with a gentle, compassionate sadness, a delicate frisson, and not of stoic indifference. In Brian Tasker's words "*Sabi* is a kind of pure and sublime melancholy and detached emotion which is not received in a self-centred way but simply honoured for what it is -- a symptom of the human condition... *Sabi* is the existential aloneness that can only be resolved by acknowledging its inevitability coupled with the joy and gratitude that can arise from its acceptance (9). Consider the following haunting example from Basho (loneliness, deserted, aged, wild):

The loneliness  
of this deserted mountain  
the aged farmer  
digging wild potatoes

On a more superficial view *sabi* can refer to anything that is old, worn,

tranquil, mellow and dignified. Like the other haiku "moods" in the absence of real insight it can all too easily lend itself to tired and well worn "oriental" haiku.

*Wabi* essentially denotes respect for the ordinary, the commonplace as opposed to the sensational. Simplicity, restraint, austerity are related meanings, with "rustic solitude" as a rather more mannered expression. Here is a nice contemporary example from Garry Hotham:

coffee  
in a paper cup --  
a long way from home

When the self withdraws its confirming sharpness and specificity of perception it leaves space for a more subtle, subdued, low key beauty to manifest. This is *shibui*, as in the following from Martin Lucas (silent, white, empty):

first darkness of dusk  
silently a white owl flies  
in the empty lane

*Aware* is the mood of transience, defined by Makoto Ueda as "sadness or melancholy arising from a deep, empathetic appreciation of the ephemeral beauty manifested in nature, human life, or a work of art (10.) It commonly translates as a nostalgic sadness connected with autumn, as with Marlene Mountain:

faded flowers on the bed sheet  
autumn night

Finally, another very Zenny haiku mood is that of understated humour, sometimes black or tinged with irony -- especially irony. It typically arises when one of our cherished delusions impacts with reality, and life momentarily lives us with a wry grin. Here Alexis Rotella and I respectively face a new day:

Undressed --  
today's role dangles  
from a metal hanger

Worn old feet  
in worn old slippers --  
really mine?

And the gentle ironies of matrimony seem to make for better haiku, in the Zen sense, than breathless passion. These two, from Karen Klein (left)

and George Swede, were close together in the September 1997  
Frogpond:

too hot to make love  
too hot  
not to

A sigh from her  
a sigh from me--  
two pages turn

### **The Zen of the Cutting Line**

The most effective haiku employ a device called "the cutting line" or "eye opener", which typically follows a disjunction (or juxtaposition) in the poem. Some Zen preliminaries may help us to understand more profoundly how this device works. In order to free their students from the conventional self-assuring perceptual patterns Zen teachers commonly resort to mutually contradictory words and phrases: iron women give birth; the sun rises at midnight, or, in this verse by the 15th century Master Ikkyu:

Hearing a crow with no mouth  
cry in the darkness of the night  
I feel a longing for  
my father before he was born (11)

So characteristic of all spirituality, paradox is only baffling, only paradoxical, to a mind unable to step out of a logically structured world of 'this' defining 'that'. In all spiritual traditions, what is is the same as what is not; one thing is all things and all things are one thing. There is all the solidity of the world of 'form' in "*a wooden hen sits on a coffin warming an egg*" (Hakuin again). But it is 'empty' of "sense" -- "pure nonsense" -- in that the self cannot confirm the self by 'making' any sense of it. In Buddhist terminology, 'form' is in fact "empty" -- of the order, solidity and permanence we need to attribute to it. In this by Basho both time (spring) and place (a hill) exist in suchness empty of conceptual referencing. The hill is "nameless" and it is the "thin mist" shrouding it which makes spring time.

Spring has come  
a nameless hill  
is shrouded in thin mist (12)

In Buddhist terminology, the power of Zen haiku lies in their embodiment of form-and-emptiness. The best of them come to us out of the moment

in an insight so right, yet so beyond our ordinary habitual perception, as to dumbfound us. We find ourselves saying more than we mean and more than we know.

Two lines set the scene and a third, cutting line throws them out of gear by switching attention to a different perception, sparking across the gap between the phrases and momentarily illuminating the whole poem in a fresh light. Our customary -- and solidified -- perceptual associations are fractured. Self momentarily loses its foothold. Selfless space ("emptiness") opens for an instant of naked clarity. We have been caught off balance. Trying to figure it out is like figuring out a joke: we miss the point. Occasionally the cutting line is wholly contradictory. Thus Sodo (1641-1715), expressing *sabishisa* (spiritual poverty):

In my hut this spring  
there is nothing --  
there is everything (13)

Faced with such paradoxes Blyth advises "*some vivacity of energy .... lest the intellect arrive and split hairs.*" They must be "swallowed in one gulp", like Yamei's pheasant:

In one shrill cry  
the pheasant has swallowed  
the broad field (13)

It would be possible to attempt a classification of different uses of the cutting line. There is, for example, the double cutting line, where the second line magicks the third into being as a throwback illumination of the first. R H Blyth (in a different connection) quotes Kikaku:

The beggar wears  
Heaven and Earth  
as his summer clothes (13)

The cutting line provides a ready, specific device in haiku making and lends itself to the cleverness of what I call "artful haiku" which lie at the opposite end of a continuum from "insightful haiku". This doesn't make them "better" or "worse", even as a genre, let alone individually. Most haijin probably write and enjoy both. Good "artful haiku" can be quite clever at tweaking our fancy -- and a bit more --- as in this one by Steve Sanfield:

"Sleep on the couch" she says  
cutting his fantasies  
in two



Altogether different is the distinction I would like to make between "broad" and "narrow" ends of the spectrum of insightful haiku. The broader profoundly illuminate our whole human condition, and are what I have specifically in mind as "Zen haiku"; the narrower do so in a more limited and specific way. However the use of the words broad and narrow is not intended to refer to the quality of the haiku. Here are two examples, broad (about the shortness... and yet... of life) and narrow (about the tedium of matrimony), from Buson and Issa respectively:

In a short life  
an hour of leisure  
this autumn evening

Those two tired dolls  
in the corner there -- ah yes,  
they are man and wife

Note that although Issa's is the narrow one it is more than merely "artful". The man and wife are dolls: the metaphor is open...

Finally, there is a Zen perspective on the optimum conditions for the making of haiku. Two conditions seem to be needful. First there is the priming and internalising of the form -- getting into haiku mood and haiku mode. Hearing or reading haiku, and particularly sharing in a group, are valuable in this respect. For presumed contemplatives, haijin have usually been a sociable lot! Secondly, and more important, is opening to a contemplative state of mind. My own experience of solitary meditation retreats of a week or more may be of interest here. The meditation I use is that of "bare awareness" ('shikan taza'), in which the mind is a mirror, not a lens. Whatever comes up is simply observed, without mental comment, and dissolves like a bubble. After some practice the mind becomes still for quite long periods. This transparency carries over from the meditation periods. Primed with "dry" haiku (through reading) it translates into haiku "readiness". I am far from being either a gifted meditator or haiku poet, and it is usually not until the second or third day that haiku begin to flow freely.

For company  
an empty chair

Bruce Ross has argued that the writing of *"the fourth generation of American and Canadian haiku poets...attests to the presiding importance of Japanese haiku values to the haiku form as a whole"* (14). Some awareness of the Zen Buddhist tradition underlying those values can be helpful, and this now flourishes vigorously in the West. This is not a matter of taking on board some oriental philosophy or modelling classic Zen haiku; quite the contrary -- in Zen parlance that would be "adding

legs to a snake". As Blyth robustly demonstrated, Zen is not the preserve of any one national culture or institutionalised religion. He found (even if highly selectively) an abundant Zen spirit in European culture and in Christianity. It is a deepening of contemplative poetic sensibility that is at the heart of the matter...

## References

- 1 R H Blyth "Haiku vol 1: Eastern Culture" Hokuseido Press, Tokyo, 1981. pp199-200.
- 2 R H Blyth "Zen in English Literature & the Oriental Classics"; Hokuseido, Tokyo, 1942. p72.
- 3 "Zen Words for the Heart: Hakuin's Commentary on the Heart Sutra", translated by Norman Waddell; Shambhala, Boston, 1996
- 4 Quoted by John Stevens, in a footnote on p25 of in his introduction to "Mountain Tasting: Zen Haiku by Santoka Taneda"; Weatherhill, New York, 1980.
- 5 Bruce Ross, "ed. Haiku Moment"; Tuttle, Boston, 1993. p.xxi.
- 6 Soiko Shigematsu "A Zen Forest: Sayings of the Masters" Weatherhill, New York, 1987.
- 7 As for (2) above, p.49.
- 8 As for (5) above, p.xxii.
- 9 Brian Tasker "Haiku and Zen"; Barebones P., 16 Wren Close, Frome BA11 2UZ U.K. pp. 38 & 39.
- 10 Quoted by Bruce Ross as for (5) above, p.xxiv.
- 11 "Crow with No Mouth: Ikkyu 15th c. Zen Master"; versions by Stephen Berg; Copper Canyon P., Port Townsend, WA, USA, 1989. p.17
- 12 As for (1) above, p115.
- 13 As for (2) above, pp186,186 & 159 respectively.
- 14 As for (5) above, p.xxvii. "

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