

This Week's Montage

—Buddha-nature

Comparative Haiku

selected by

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Within the Theravada tradition, the oldest Buddhist “school,” practiced in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia, Siddhattha Gotama’s birthday is celebrated on May 8th—providing an excellent occasion to recognize some Buddhist-themed haiku. “Buddha-nature” is a key concept of the Mahayana tradition (which includes Zen), indicating the potential for enlightenment all sentient beings possess. Thus, the occasion and title of this gallery bring together two major Buddhist traditions: the Theravada and the Mahayana. At present, it’s somewhat fashionable in haiku circles to downplay the connection between haiku and Buddhism. Perhaps that comes as a reaction against the formidable early influences of Blyth, Hackett, and Amann; perhaps it’s also because the West is so steeped in Platonic/Christian thought. But there’s no underestimating the potential haiku possesses for giving aesthetic expression to such key Buddhist concepts as “this present moment” and “the suchness of things.” Nor should one forget that Bashō and Buson were Zen lay priests and Issa a devout Pure Land Buddhist. These masters were far from the only Japanese haikai with significant connections to Buddhist philosophy. “The disciple of Bashō who had the deepest understanding of Zen was Jōshō,” Blyth tells us. This gallery presents some of Jōshō’s simple yet profound haiku, which are not as well known in the West as they should be, alongside those of two outstanding contemporary English-language practitioners: Burnell Lippy, whose work is implicitly “infused with the Buddhist precepts he practices” and Stanford M. Forrester, whose haiku are well-known for their explicit—and often extremely playful—engagement with Buddhist themes. In some sense all these poems provide insight into Buddha-nature.

¹ http://www.redmoonpress.com/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=49

Jōshō (1661-1704)

Burnell Lippy (b. 1944)

Stanford M. Forrester (b. 1963)

Leaves,
Fallen on a rock
Beneath the water.

Fields and mountains—
All taken by the snow;
Nothing remains.

A *hototogisu* cries;
The waters of the lake
Are slightly muddy.

The frog rises to the surface
By the strength
Of its non-attachment.

An evening shower:
The ants are running down
The bamboos.

Rain begins to fall:
The thatcher turns
And looks at the sea.

Bent over by the rain,
The ears of barley
Make it a narrow path.

from *Haiku: In Four Volumes* by R. H. Blyth
(Hokuseido, 1949–52)

twenty below
the Milky Way
lined up with the river

the woods’ long vines
reaching the ground
evening calm

late-rising moon
each rock in the stream
has its own sound

the long segments
of the Big Dipper’s handle
summer fields

hoot of an owl
a thousand fir trees
touching each other

autumn deepens
one leaf carries another
across the pond

geese
that stay—
winter rain

1–4 from *late geese up a dry fork* (Red Moon Press, 2003)
5 from *Modern Haiku* 36.2, 2005
6 from *Frogpond* 29.3, 2006
7 from *The Heron’s Nest* 10.2, 2008

drafty temple—
only the buddha
not shivering

summer drought...
the Zen garden
in bloom

dog shit
or me
the fly doesn’t care

morning downpour...
only the sound
of the temple bell stays dry

January sun—
the snow melts first
on Buddha’s belly

Zen meditation—
emptying my mind
when no one is looking

makes a good
anchor—
the stone buddha

1 from *Snapshots* 9, 2001
2 from *Frogpond* 25.1, 2002
3 from *Modern Haiku* 33.3, 2002
4 from *Ko*, Spring/Summer 2005
5–7 from *January Sun* (Bottle Rockets Press, 2007)

Previous Montages

April 19: *The Good Earth*
April 26: *Antipodes*

Next Week's Montage: *Women's Experience*

Chiyo-ni
Anita Virgil
Ruth Yarrow