

## Haiku and Zen

by George Marsh

Zen Buddhism has significantly shaped the historical development of Japanese haiku. Not all the haiku poets were Zen Buddhists, but several key figures were. Basho was Zen trained, and ordained as a priest, but he did not seem to make up his mind if he was a priest or not. In one of his travel sketches he describes himself as being dressed in a priest's black robe, "but neither a priest nor an ordinary man of this world was I, for I wavered ceaselessly like a bat that passes for a bird at one time and for a mouse at another." He did not have a parish and priestly duties, but he often wore the robes.

Issa lived for several years in monasteries and took his name from the Buddhist ideas of emptiness and change. "Inasmuch as life is empty as a bubble which vanishes instantly, I will henceforth call myself Haikaiji Issa," he wrote. Haikaiji means "haiku temple" and Issa means "one tea," signifying a bubble in a cup of tea. When Issa was paralysed by a stroke at the age of fifty eight, and recovered, he changed his name to Soseibo, meaning "Revived priest."

The ancient poets Basho most admired were two Chinese Zen eccentrics who lived on 'Cold Mountain' sometime between the sixth and ninth centuries, Hanshan and Shih-te, and a Japanese mainstream Buddhist of the twelfth century, Priest Saigyō.

One of Buddhism's 'Three Signs of Being' is that all things are subject to change. The strong emphasis on the seasons in haiku means that a sense of the changes in the natural world, paralleled in the human world, is at the core of every haiku:

Hoarfrost spikes  
have sprung out overnight  
like the hairs on my chin  
(Koji)

In Zen Buddhism there is a great enlightenment called satori, sought through many years of disciplined meditation. There are also many little flashes of enlightenment, called kensho, which are intense forms of those everyday noticings that surprise us or please us because they seem to reveal a truth, or to be exemplary, or to connect us again, momentarily, with the sense of awe. Haiku is a momentary, condensed poetic form and its special quality is that it is perfectly adapted to give the reader that little instant of kensho insight. Basho developed the haiku form so that each haiku became a little burst of awakening. It is this that is the essence of haiku, not its number of syllables.

Some haiku are explicitly about moments of kensho, and words like "awakening" are the clue:

Awakened at midnight  
by the sound of the water jar  
cracking from the ice  
(Basho, trans. Hamill)

A pattering of rain  
on the new eaves  
brings me awake  
(Koji, trans. Chiyoko/Marsh)

Zen Buddhism is centred on the practice of meditation. In meditation the trainee stills the hectic surface activity of the mind: the constant planning, speculating, fantasising, hoping, dreading, assessing, recalling, self-congratulation, self-doubt and so on, to which we humans are prone. When a measure of control over the runaway mind is established, a calmer space appears.

As the trainee attends to the life-rhythms of this calm space, he or she begins to experience the things mystics of all religious traditions have always said are true of the ultimate reality: its unity, love, boundlessness. The calm space beneath thought has various names, but the sort of words that have been used traditionally for describing it are 'stillness,' 'silence,' 'emptiness,' 'nothingness,' and 'void.'

You might imagine, from this list, that Buddhism was a form of nihilism, but that is not the case. The 'nothingness' is not barren. Zen master Lin-chi said, 'It is vibrantly alive, yet has no root or stem. You can't gather it up, you can't scatter it to the winds. The more you search for it the farther away it gets. But don't search for it and it's right before your eyes, its miraculous sound always in your ears.' (The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi translated by Burton Watson, Shambhala Publications 1993 p.58). Poets are struggling to convey the inexpressible, to find images for the 'miraculous sound' in the heart of the silence. Zen poets hear the sound of the life-force emerging from emptiness to fill everything:

The skylark:  
Its voice alone fell,  
Leaving nothing behind  
(Ampu, trans. Blyth)

The silence;  
The voice of the cicadas  
Penetrates the rocks.  
(Basho, trans. Blyth)

The sense of nothingness or emptiness unites everything:

Fields and mountains  
all taken by snow;  
nothing remains  
(Joso, trans. Horioka, amended by Marsh)

Meditation can be indicated by the word 'sit' or some phrase referring to stillness, but it is a stillness in the midst of the rush of active life:

Deep within the stream  
the huge fish lie motionless  
facing the current  
(J.W. Hackett)

On a rock in the rapids  
sits  
a fallen camellia  
(Miura Yuzuru, trans. Chiyoko/Marsh)

The posture for meditation sitting, cross-legged on a cushion, is a matter of balance:

the gull soars on nothing  
but slight corrections  
to the tilt of its nose  
(George Marsh)

The meditation hall, called a zendo, is the place for going from the particular to the universal:

In the zendo  
when the coughing ceased  
all sound ceased  
(Satokawa Suisho trans. Marsh)

The black robes of a crow might remind one of a priest:

The crow sits  
on a dead branch –  
evening of autumn  
(Basho, trans. Marsh)

Why flap to town?  
A country crow  
going to market  
(Basho, trans. Marsh)

Lao Tsu was the original archetype of The Sage. He lived five hundred years before Christ and wrote The Book of The Way (Tao Te Ching). So references to paths, roads, ways and so on are always resonant. Living the religious life of meditation practice has been known in the East as following 'The Way' or 'The Path' from the time of Lao Tsu, more than a thousand years before Buddhism came to China. By extension, the arts through which people express their meditative understanding are also known as The Ways: flower arranging, archery, tea ceremony, acting, dancing and poetry are among them. Since meditation is essentially something one can only do focused on the inner life, even when many people meditate together, the references often have a lonely quality - even more so in the case of Basho, who struck out on his own poetic path:

My way -  
no-one on the road  
and it's autumn, getting dark  
(Basho, trans. Marsh)

Beyond the crossroads  
deep into autumn  
the hillroad disappears  
(James Norton)

The acceptance of an essential loneliness in the human condition is a characteristic of the Buddhist meditator. It is a loneliness that we recognise in others, too:

The scarecrow in the distance;  
it walked with me  
as I walked  
(San-in)

The long night -  
made longer  
by a dog's barking  
(Santoka, trans. Stevens)

An octopus pot -  
inside, a short-lived dream  
under the summer moon  
(Basho, trans. Ueda)

To Basho the road was not just a literary or religious metaphor. He was a traveller, walking the open road on journeys the length and breadth of Japan. In the twentieth century another Zen Buddhist haiku poet followed in his footsteps. Santoka Taneda lived as a wandering mendicant monk, a 'gentleman of the road.' For him the lonely path was a daily reality:

There is nothing else I can do;  
I walk on and on.  
(Santoka, trans. Stevens)

Going deeper  
And still deeper -  
The green mountains.  
(Santoka, trans. Stevens)

Wet with morning dew,  
I go in the direction I want.  
(Santoka, trans. Stevens)

The road is a palpably real experience to Santoka and Basho, as well as a metaphor for one's chosen life-path. Fish do lie facing the current; gulls do soar on the wind adjusting the angle of their beaks; and snow does take the features from the landscape. Haiku imagery is always first and foremost a real observation. It never merely illustrates an idea. It is not simile. The poems that have the most resonance and power, however, are those that are observations which have a symbolic after-taste. The symbolic dimension is an echo of the primary meaning, uniting the particular detail which is being noticed - often natural - with a human significance.

By George Marsh