

## Haiku, Zen and the Eternal Now

*This is an edited version, with some additional commentary, of Jacqui Murray's presentation to a workshop sponsored by Byron Bay's Dangerously Poetic Press on 12 April 2008.*

Understanding or embracing Zen is not a prerequisite for writing wonderful haiku but even a little contact can expand horizons and help writers take haiku beyond simple commentaries on nature. Sometimes it is useful in any art form to look back to what came before and to look at beginnings for fresh inspiration. That was the workshop's objective. Not to provide a guided tour of Zen Buddhism. Rather, the objective was to take participants on a journey to extend and stretch minds and our approaches to writing haiku.

In the past decade much attention in the West has been given to experimentation, innovation and finding new ways to write haiku. That is good and is part of a long tradition that dates back to Shiki in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and haijin such as Kaneko Tohta in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tohta is Honorary President of Japan's *Gendai Haiku Kyokai* or Modern Haiku Association. He visited Australia as part of a senior Japanese haiku delegation in 1988 to help kick start interest in the art form following its decline in Australia the 1970s. With more than 50 publications and 60 years of haiku experimentation to his credit, the octogenarian genius Tohta is still regarded as the *enfant terrible* of the avant garde in Japan who has long been pushing the haiku envelope into the realms of the metaphysical.

Tohta stunned the haiku world during the 1950s by arguing for different methodological approaches to haiku which allowed for the 'shaping' of one self and 'subjective expressionism' and more 'plasticism' in form. Thus his haiku are often of broken rhythm, much longer than the traditional 17 syllables and often feature metaphors that draw on earlier haiku masters. Thus:

*the plum in blossom  
blue sharks have come right in  
into the garden*

and, in defiance of traditionalists who believe neither man-made objects or indeed people are not valid subject matter for haiku:

*bank employees  
fluorescing like so many squid  
first thing in the morning*

or:

*on a trip to gorge myself  
on salmon, the evening sun  
becomes the sky's anus*

With supporters and detractors heatedly arguing the merits of his case for change, Tohta himself simply calls for haiku poets 'to practice the modern in the grandeur of the old.' Thus it is useful to sometimes look back to familiarize ourselves with that 'old'.

What is the relevance of Zen to Haiku? Whilst there is no haikudo as in bushido, Zen and haiku are about the 'way', about finding one's way to what is known as haiku 'spirit'. Zen was present at the very moment haiku came into being. Haiku was Zen in inspiration. Haiku was an expression of the Zen Buddhist canon. Haiku was to bring the common man and woman closer to creation. In other words, the creation of haiku was an outward expression of creation according to the tenets of Zen Buddhism.

What is the relevance of Zen to haiku today, more than 350 years later? In one word it is discipline. The discipline of self. The discipline to quiet the chatter of our minds. The discipline to see things as they are, as they exist in this Eternal Now.

*on a rock  
in the rapids sits  
a fallen camelia*

*Miura Yuzuru*

In other words, to look beyond - to look into. That is, to look beyond the obvious, to see the life force and spirit of things. To look more closely at the world around us and our place in that world. To rejoice in the discovery of a world beyond what others see and to bring to others, to share with others, our insights in simple, accessible words and phrases. As did Issa:

*old dog listens  
intently as if to work songs  
of worms*

Learning to pause is difficult in our world. Too much of our modern lifestyle demands speed and haste. Few of us take time out each day to silence our chattering minds and our restless bodies. Not enough of us see, let alone understand, the essence, the life forces that are swirling about us giving us life. One way to simplify the task is to reach back into our world, that is, the natural world. Haiku will then become something more than flat landscapes – that is – simple observation of a photographic image. Your haiku will develop character and depth as you begin to appreciate the life forces inherent in

that landscape – as you begin to see the multi-dimensional rather than the obvious image. They will become a celebration, a celebration of your unique understanding of the Eternal Now. To quote R.H. Blyth, regarded as the West's first great haiku poet:

*To pour all of one's self into the thing, and let the thing penetrate every part of one's self, needs much travail of mind and body.*

That does not mean that Zen concepts as they relate to haiku are inaccessible. I particularly like an insight from Nyogen Senzoki and Ruth Stout McCandless which appears in their 1953 *Buddhism and Zen*.

*Zen is the actual business of the present moment.*

That is the essence of great haiku. Conveying an insight into a special moment. And that is best summed up by the early American haiku poet, J W Hackett:

*Lifefulness, not beauty, is the real quality of haiku.*

I am an ardent advocate of an Australian way – of writing haiku with an Australian voice. But I also believe that we can only write haiku our way when we have a better understanding of what haiku is supposed to be and an appreciation of what went before. Sometimes I feel that haiku in the West has lost its way. That we have plunged into something that appears deceptively simple without understanding that appearances can be deceptive. That we have forgotten the important attributes of humility and compassion in our approaches to writing haiku. As we are fortunate enough to have an accumulated body of knowledge about haiku, we can learn from it. Not to copy, but to broaden our own work.

Haiku was originally introduced to the West through art – particularly through *ukiyo-e*, woodcut prints of Japanese city and landscapes – in the 19th century. Only a few westerners experimented with the form. Real interest was sparked after World War Two – largely due to the efforts of two men - Zen disciple and teacher, D.T. Suzuki (Daisetz is a Buddhist name meaning Great Simplicity) and British academic and haiku poet R.H Blyth.

Suzuki travelled widely from the latter years of the 19th century and was a prolific author of books in English about Zen. He thus became the most influential interpreter of Zen for western audiences in the first half of the 20th century. But it was Blyth, who lived and taught for most of his life at Japanese universities, and who was himself a Zen Buddhist, who made Japanese haiku in translation widely available in the West. He published *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics* in 1942 and his *Haiku* in four volumes between 1947 and 1952. Blyth also wrote a long list of attributes he regarded as essential to the creation and appreciation of haiku. They are:

*Selflessness, loneliness, grateful acceptance, worldlessness, non-intellectuality, contradictoriness, humour, freedom, non-morality, simplicity, materiality and love and courage.*

Suzuki and Blyth were largely responsible for the 50's Zen and haiku boom in the West where it was taken up by the beat generation and American luminaries such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. But I always give the prize for originality in early haiku experimentation to Irish novelist J P Donleavy, who infamously wrote:

*there was a man  
who built a boat to sail away  
but it sank*

It does kinda have a feel of 'tuning in and dropping out' were it not for that touch of Irish fatalism. But it would probably have touched a cord with the old masters. Suzuki held that haiku was one of the Zen 'arts' and that true haiku could not be written without Zen influence. Or to put it another way, the best haiku – like the difficult stages of peeling back the mind one has to go through to reach the Zen *satori* or enlightenment – are multilayered. Like Buson's :

*perched  
upon the temple bell  
the butterfly sleeps*

The use of the word 'temple' is significant. Therefore, the bell is not the lighter brass bell Shinto believers ring to wake up the gods. Buson's bell is big, heavy cast iron which age to a very dark green black. So an instant image of contrasts appears. The tiny butterfly on the huge black bell. The very best haiku are multi-layered. Zen haiku, however, always suggest a great deal more than is immediately obvious. Thus Suzuki proposed an interpretation from the Zen point of view as follows:

*The contrast of a little white butterfly and a heavy black bell at once strikes us in various ways. Some people may think that the poet was somewhat playfully inclined, putting the sleeping butterfly on a temple bell that may be struck by a thoughtless monk at any moment, when its blooming vibration will surely frighten the poor little innocent thing away. We dance over a volcano altogether unaware of the possibility explosion, just like Buson's butterfly. And for this reason, some expect to read in Buson's certain moral warning aimed at our frivolous habits of living.*

*But to my mind there is in Buson's haiku another side, revealing his deeper insight into life. By this I mean his intuition of the Unconscious as it is expressed by the images of the butterfly and bell. It is now fatigued, the wings long for a rest. The bell is idly hanging, it perches on it, and being tired it goes to sleep. It now feels vibrations that were neither expected nor unexpected. As it feels them as an actuality, it flies away as*

*unconcernedly as before. The butterfly is unconscious that the bell exists separate from itself; in fact it is not conscious of itself. It makes no “discriminations”, therefore it is perfectly free from anxieties, worries, doubts, hesitations, and so on; in other words, it lives a life of absolute faith and fearlessness. It is the human mind that makes the butterfly live a life of “discrimination”, and hence of “little faith.” (Zen Buddhism and its influence on Japanese Culture)*

But we must also be aware of the trap of falling victim to intellectual vanity. About which the poet Issa was fond of writing:

*the vanity of men  
they would like to retain  
this passing winter moon*  
Issa

Another teacher, Nakagawa Soen who, like Suzuki, also taught at America's Columbia University was Zen mentor to American haiku poet J W Hackett who described Soen as a man of great kindness and intuitive wisdom. Like Blyth, Hackett underwent Zen training. One day priest and student were sitting together looking at Mount Fuji. Soen asked Hackett what is known as a *koan* – a form of Rinzai Zen examination.

'Can you make Mt Fuji smile?' asked Soen.

'Look at the hawk. See how he is enjoying the view.' Came Hackett's reply.

Hackett not only passed that examination but he went on to write what has become one of his most famous and enduring haiku. He read this aloud at a gathering of monks a short time later.

*searching on the wind  
the hawk's cry  
in the shape of its beak*

But still Soen searched his student's mind for understanding. After Hackett had finished reading he asked:

'What is the sound of the hawk?'

'Awk!' screeched Hackett, earning applause and laughter from the gathering.

Hackett had experienced *satori* – profound, lasting enlightenment. He had recognized his moment and had recorded the eternal now. There could be no further adornment. Hackett had also done something more. He had demonstrated to both western and Japanese haiku devotees that westerners could write great haiku ... something Suzuki believed they were incapable of. The problem, however, lay more in the teaching than in the student.

Both Suzuki and Blyth elevated the Zen trained haiku poet Basho to the position of Japanese greatest haiku poet. In one sense this has been a great shame because it sometimes lead to Japan's other, and some might argue, greater and often more accessible, haiku poets such as Buson, Issa and others, being overlooked. As a consequence, I believe, widespread frustration with Basho has produced a genre of haiku that ignores what went before and simply goes it own way. A quick glance at any number of web and discussion sites will reveal any number of justifications as to why we can 'do our own thing'. Little wonder. In my experience ...

*old pond  
a frog jumps in  
sound of water*

usually confounds adults and completely baffles children. At last count there were more than 100 acknowledged English translations of this haiku. Had our introduction to Japanese haiku been Basho's:

*nothing in the song  
of cicadas suggests they  
are about to die*

or Sampu's:

*the skylark  
its voice alone fell  
leaving nothing behind*

we might have all been a lot better off. One of the problems lies in Basho's use of so many allusions to Japanese culture, religion and literature.

*crow sits  
on a dead branch  
autumn evening*

or the intrusion of life's necessities in:

*why flap to town?  
a country crow  
going to market*

make absolutely no sense unless the reader knows that the crows' black garb can be a metaphor for a Buddhist priest. Luckily most of Basho's haiku do make perfect sense.

*exhausted I sought  
a country inn but found*

*wisteria in bloom*

And we do owe Basho the great debt of the haiku form. Basho was trained in the Zen tradition and was ordained as a priest. But whilst he often wore the black robes of a priest the writings that have been left to us indicate an ambivalence regarding whatever priestly duties he could have taken up. Rather, it appears that he regarded the pursuit of a Zen spirit in poetry, more particularly haiku, as his worldly mission. Basho renounced the world to devote himself to haiku.

This was a radical departure. And so was his from the world. He left the world to reach the realm of enlightenment where he and nature could be united as one. Before his creation of haiku, Japanese poetry was either courtly, that is overly traditionalist and refined to the point of artifice, or common and usually simply vulgar. Basho argued for, and demonstrated, poetry for the common man ... and woman. He called for everyday language, familiar imagery and a short form.

*from all these trees  
in salads, soups, everywhere  
cherry blossoms fall*

But his Zen Buddhist training also required that this new type of poetry celebrate every man's intrinsic 'Buddha Nature' ... or enlightenment. Thus that it be, in a sense, religious poetry. Basho called on his disciples to:

*Make the universe your companion, always bearing in mind the true nature of all creation – mountains and rivers, trees and grasses, and humanity – and enjoy falling blossoms and scattering leaves.*

The reference to falling blossoms and scattering leaves is to Spring and Autumn. It is also to one of Buddhism's three signs of being ... that everything is subject to change. As there is seasonal change in the natural world so there is change in the human world. Seasonal references are at the heart of traditional haiku.

*walking on dishes  
the rat's feet make the music  
of shivering cold*

What is interesting is that even in his time – Basho lived from 1644 to 1694 – he felt his spirit was restricted in town and city and that he should 'hit the road' to experience complete freedom. This notion of the itinerant, the mendicant, the pilgrim is a common theme in many religions and does reflect a widespread recognition of the basic need for peace and quiet amongst those who are starting out on journeys of enlightenment.

Complete quietness and physical stillness help to reduce what can be a painful sense of separation – or self-separateness from our life source. This separation is, according to Buddhist teaching, the source of our suffering – albeit it ignorant even innocent. Stillness of mind and body can, at sacred precious moments, produce oneness with the universe, utter freedom and ... freedom from suffering. There is also a strong belief that from this comes true artistic insight – for writers, for artists, for musicians and haiku poets such as Basho.

*lonely silence  
a single cicada's cry  
sinks into rock*

And from his student Buson we get this insight into the Eternal Now.

*utter aloneness  
another great pleasure  
in autumn twilight*

Basho urged his students to:

*Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or to the bamboo if you want to learn about bamboo. And in so doing, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Otherwise you impose yourself on the object and do not learn.*

Poetry issues of its own accord when poet and object have become one – when you have plunged into the object and see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well phrased haiku may be, if the feeling is not natural – if the object and poet are separate – then your poetry is not true poetry but merely your subjective counterfeit. Thus long before the discovery of the atom, Basho could write:

*a world of dew  
and within every dewdrop  
a world of struggle*

But his is more than an insight. This poem is also representative of Basho's personal attainment of *satori* – that Great Enlightenment. Or to put it a more prosaic way, it the use of internal contrast of both poetic composition and allusion to possibilities beyond the obvious that makes Zen influenced haiku so powerful. This is the same duality that appears in the bell and butterfly haiku.

Known in the English poetic tradition as 'internal contrast', the use of two contrasting images in haiku serves to provide what some have called the 'aha' of haiku ... or ... the sting in the tail. Ideally one image is of time and place whilst the other evokes, or hints



at, invites, mood, emotion or some other intuitive response. Sometimes great themes can be more obvious than the commonplace.

*in the midst of this world  
we stroll along the roof of hell  
gawking at flowers*

*Issa*

And here is a haiku I wrote on the spur of the moment at a Cloudcatchers ginko.

*girl in red shoes  
busy listening to the sound  
of her own voice*

At one superficial level this appears a witty, but cruel, commentary. Or is it? Zen might see something more. A developmental phase in a child's life when that child indeed begins listening to an inner self, discovers an inner voice and begins experimenting with the 'great game' of life. We have all watched children making this discovery and experimenting through various stages of development. Nothing could be more natural. The pity is that most of us lose the intuitive, innocent, unencumbered, pleasure the child derives from such experimentation. In infancy our senses are our teachers – taste, sight, smell, hearing and touch. These are, if you like, the Nirvanic, ever-changing 'becomingness' of life. And the real irony is that Zen students then have to spend years of hard study learning to do it all over again. Many of the Great Japanese Masters hold that kids do haiku best.

*sitting low on the grass  
a red bug crawls across my hand  
I am his whole world*

Like Nancy Perez then aged ten, I suggest we all take some time out to sit on the grass and look at the world.

(I would also like to thank Janice M. Bostok who joined us at this workshop to share some of her special insights.)

***Jacqui Murray, April 2008***