

THE ART AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICE OF HAIKU

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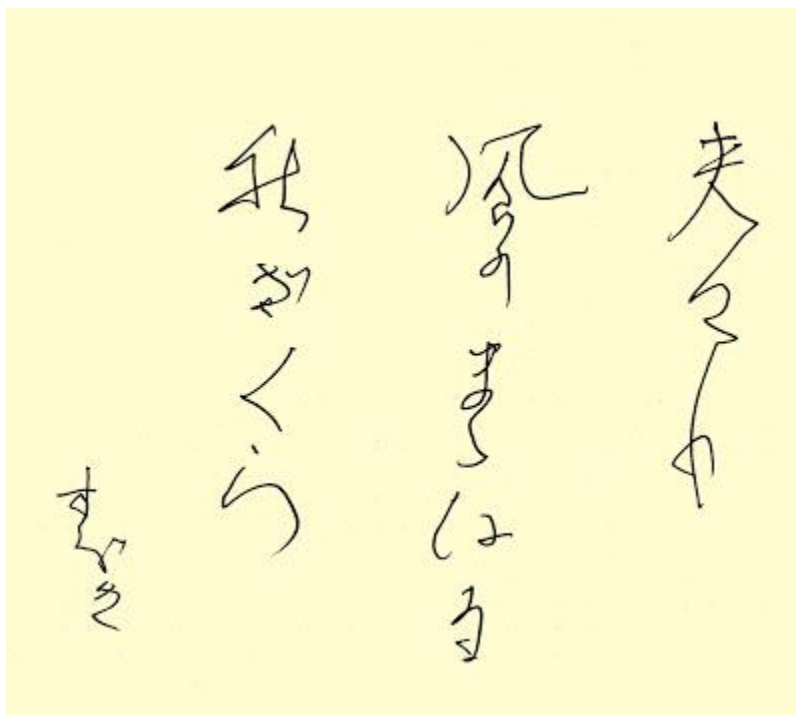
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Recently I spent a week or so in Japan, meeting up again with some very dear Japanese friends of mine with whom I have been associated in a certain Buddhist denomination. As was the case on my trip to Japan the year before, I was the constant recipient of much love and great kindness. On this trip---as well as on this previous occasion---I met up with a remarkable 86-year old Japanese man, Isao, and his lovely wife Takeko. Isao, a former school teacher, said this to me on my most recent trip to Japan:

I am going to be 87 years [old] and even though I have sickness I'm happy because I appreciate everything, especially family, sickness, even death, too, I can appreciate through long experience of praying for others all the time. And I respect all religions, too. ... Every day I try to appreciate my family and everything, and try to appreciate each moment and to pray for all people and animals and everything else. ...

Each day Isao, a *haijin* (that is, a *haiku* poet or master), writes at least one piece of *haiku*. Whilst we were having tea together in a coffee shop, on my last day in Japan, he suddenly called for a piece of writing paper on which to inscribe a piece of *haiku* which had just come to him---in the magic of the moment. This is the poem Isao wrote, quick as a flash, at the coffee shop:



The poem, translated into English, goes something like this:

With the influence of the wind
Each flower of cosmos will come
Out by each different way.

Beautiful sentiment---and very Unitarian.

Nobel-Prize-winning Indian author Rabindranath Tagore had this to say about the poetic form called haiku:

Often a poem consists of no more than three lines, but these are sufficient both for poets and readers. That is why I have never heard anyone singing in the streets since I have been here. The hearts of these people are not resonant like a waterfall, but silent like a lake. All their poems which I have heard are picture-poems, not song-poems. When the heart aches and burns, then life is spent; the Japanese spend very little in this direction. The inner self finds complete expression in their sense of beauty, which is independent of self-interest. We do not have to break our hearts over flowers and birds or the moon. Our only connection with them is the enjoyment of beauty; they do not hurt us anywhere, or deprive us of anything; our lives are in no wise maimed by them. That is why three lines are enough.

Tagore went on to say:

There is not only brevity of wording in these poems, there is also brevity of feeling which is not disturbed by the heart's economy. I think there is something deeply symbolical of Japan in this.

Haiku is both a form of Japanese poetry as well as a spiritual practice that has managed to find its way into numerous religious and spiritual traditions including Christianity. *Haiku* is also a way of living mindfully, *letting*---please note that important operative word---the very *livingness* of life, in all its concrete directness and immediacy, to write itself. *Haiku* is thus a 'means' by which we can learn to live more fully and with heightened awareness in the eternal now. Sir George Sansom defined *haiku* as 'little drops of poetic essence,' whilst Harold Henderson described *haiku* as 'meditations ... starting points for trains of thought.' R H Blyth, who published several volumes of haiku translations, said, 'Japanese literature stands or falls by *haiku*.'

A *ku* is said to be the shortest sequence or set of words equal or corresponding to a complete thought. The word *hai* means playful or amusing, and also rambling (here, in the sense of writing as one feels inclined). *Haiku* describes, with choiceless (that is, non-judgmental and non-analytical [hence, *very few* adjectives, adverbs and other modifying words]) awareness, the *here-and-now*---that is, that which is truly *real*.

Haiku---called *hokku* in the 17th century (and also called *haikai*)---was 'invented' by Buddhist monks who quite ingeniously combined, among other things, Buddhist, Confucian and Daoist thought in order to arrive at a means whereby words---despite

their inherent limitations---could get *as close as possible* to saying what is truly *real*. One famous Japanese *haiku* poet Bashō (1644-1694), who found the divine in nature, captured the very heart and essence of *haiku* and mindful living---the two are really one and the same---in these wonderful oft-quoted words:

'Go to the pine if you want to learn about the pine, or the bamboo if you want to learn about the bamboo. And in doing so, you must leave your subjective preoccupation with yourself. Your poetry issues of its own accord when you and the object have become one---when you have plunged deep enough into the object to see something like a hidden glimmering there. However well-phrased your poetry may be, if the object and yourself are separate---then your poetry is not true poetry but a semblance of the real thing.'

As a form of Japanese poetry---and a very short form at that, always using a bare minimum of words---*haiku* is typically characterised (at least in its more traditional form) by four ordinarily readily discernible features, all four of which combine to ensure that any *haiku* records a direct and immediate experience of life:

- first, the use of 17 *on* (also known as *morae* ['beats']) [NOTE: *not* syllables, but more like phonetic 'sound units'] in a 3-part structure consisting of 3 phrases of 5, 7 and 5 *on* respectively, traditionally (but not necessarily in all cases) printed in a single vertical line;
- secondly, the inclusion of a *kiru* ('cutting'), often taking the form of a sometimes jarring juxtaposition [cf the polarities and contradictions of 'real' life] of the highly realistic (as opposed to impressionistic and metaphoric) descriptions of two distinct and ego-less [i.e. no 'I's' or 'me's'] images or ideas (ordinarily directly drawn from the world of nature as their subject), with the presence of a *kireji* (a 'pause' or 'cutting' word, letter or syllable, distinguishing the two images or ideas) between them, which may mark the end of any one of the three phrases;
- thirdly, the inclusion of a *kigo* (a seasonal word or reference [that is, a reference to some occurrence in nature, or to a specific season, or to some flora or fauna], ordinarily being the subject of the poem), usually drawn from a *saijiki* (an extensive but defined list of seasonal words); and
- fourthly, the frequent use of free grammatical structure.

More modern Japanese *haiku* are less likely to follow the tradition of 17 *on* or to take nature as their subject, but the use of juxtaposition as described above generally continues.

Here's a good example of the literary form, translated into English, from the original lines penned by one of Japan's greatest exponents of the form, the poet and painter

Buson (1716-1784), who dealt with existing things in their concrete immediacy---the here-and-now:

Ears of my old age;
The summer rains
Falling down the rain-pipe.

As a spiritual practice---and a way of life---*haiku* is the creative and experiential essence of the practice of mindfulness, with all its concrete directness and immediacy. As such, *haiku* superbly captures the extraordinary in the ordinary and sometimes mundane events and things of everyday life, and the writing of *haiku* helps to sharpen one's direct, unmediated and uninterrupted awareness of life unfolding *naturally*---please note that word---from moment to moment. A 'good' piece of haiku both tells a story and paints a vivid word-picture---with great brevity. The rest is left to the reader or listener.

Arguably, *haiku*---which is meant to be *heard* more than it is to be *read*---is best written right after experiencing the event or happening the subject of the poem, with the juxtaposed images being directly observed everyday objects or occurrences, but that does not necessarily have to be the case. Also, *haiku* should be written having in mind the anticipated effect or impact on the reader. At least that is how he sees it. Take, for example, this *haiku* of Buson, which, quite typically, contains two descriptive juxtaposed images (separated by a cut or *kire*) with a dramatic and sometimes totally unexpected 'conclusion':

The slanting sun:
The shadow of a hill with a deer on it
Enters the temple gate.

... and this one as well:

The coolness:
The voice of the bell
As it leaves the bell!

There are *no* firm rules for writing *haiku* in English. Strictly speaking, any writing of *haiku* in English is nothing more than an English *imitation* of a *haiku*. Certainly, there is no strict syllable (or the like) count as is found in traditional Japanese *haiku*---the Japanese monosyllabic phonetic system is clearly an advantage over the English system (at least for creating a sense of heightened directness and immediacy). Also, there are no seasonal words as such in English.

Many (but by no means all) writers of *haiku* in English limit themselves to 3 (or sometimes fewer) lines---roughly replicating the Japanese 3-part structure---of *up to* (but not necessarily) 17 syllables and generally include a cut or *kire* (sometimes in the

form of a punctuation mark such as a dash or ellipsis, or an implied break, because English has no direct equivalent for the *kireji* to contrast two distinct but often interconnected images. (Speaking personally, I stick to the '17 rule'. You see, being a lawyer, I am almost always wordy---and too much so---so I impose the 17 syllable limit upon myself lest I go on and on.)

The important thing, it is said, is to try to replicate, or at least *imitate*, the 'spirit' of Japanese *haiku*. Brevity, directness, and immediacy are the hallmarks of all 'good' *haiku*. Here are some other useful hints and suggestions:

- although the vast majority of English *haiku* appear in 3 lines [highly recommended], there are a number of variants in practice, including one line (*monoku*), 4 [or even more than 4] lines (*haiqua*), 'vertical *haiku*', circular form (*cirku*), etc;
- use *no more than* 17 [eg 5-7-5] syllables in any *haiku* poem---the typical length of English *haiku* is 10-14 syllables;
- include a cut or *kire* (eg in the form of a punctuation mark) to contrast two distinct (if also interconnected) images;
- avoid the use of 'I's' and 'me's' in your *haiku* writing---*haiku* should be ego-less and objective (as opposed to subjective);
- remember, *haiku* is realistic, *not* impressionistic, so avoid all metaphor and the like---also, *haiku* poems don't rhyme;
- minimise the use of adjectives, adverbs and all other modifiers, the reason being that those words almost invariably involve personal judgment, analysis and the like---those things have *no* place in *haiku*, which seeks to describe *things-as-they-are* without judgment, evaluation or the like;
- by all means be ungrammatical; use gerunds freely (eg 'Hail, / Flying into the fire / As fast as its legs can carry it' [Issa]; 'Cold winter rain; / Mingling their horns, / The oxen of the moor' [Ranko]; 'The old man of the temple, / Splitting wood / In the winter moonlight' [Buson]);
- don't ramble or try to catch at stray ideas---as thought comes, write it down; don't try to be 'clever' or 'literary'; don't aim at 'beauty,' aim at significance and impact;
- remember, the best *haiku* comes from direct and immediate, uninterrupted and unmediated, 'bare' attention to, and choiceless awareness of, life itself as it unfolds from one moment to the next; so, stay as near to life and nature as possible.

Happy haiku-ing!

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