



The Haiku Path

***A brief overview of haiku poetry as a spiritual practice,
based on the teachings of Fr. Thomas Hand, S.J. (Hando¹)
and the Japanese haiku masters.***

Introduction

"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."

(Bashō)

Haiku is about inter-being.

The word "interbeing" originated with the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh. It means: everything is in everything else. We experience this reality through mindfulness, through Being in the Here and Now. One life-energy is permeating everything.

Haiku means letting this energy/life/reality write itself.

Or, to put it simply: A haiku records an immediate experience of life.

Haiku writing is sometimes called a way of life, rather than an art. It could also be described as a way of seeing, listening, being.

Because haiku writing is rooted in experience, the best time to compose a haiku poem is right after the event. But the experience comes first! Only afterwards, when it is recalled, as vividly as possible, we can put it into words that convey, as directly as possible, what happened.

A. The Spirit of Haiku Writing

"Don't follow in the footsteps of the old poets – seek what they sought."
(Bashō)

The haiku spirit expresses:

- Simple awareness of the present
- Living this moment to the full
- Experiencing the flow of life energy

Calm winter evening:
A fishing boat returns
Laden with the sun
T. Horiuchi

Haiku should be egoless – no self. One forgets the *separate* self in simple awareness. No self-centered sentimentality.

The bell fades
the fragrance of blossoms remains
this quiet evening
Bashō

Avoid personal or possessive pronouns (especially I/me/my). In Japanese haiku, there is very little **direct** expression of emotion. The poet describes that which s/he experiences, not how s/he feels about it.

The longest night
more time now
for counting stars
Barbara Campitelli

However, there is often an **indirect** expression of emotion, especially the feelings engendered by ephemeral beauty, such as cherry blossoms, and the transitory nature of life:

Autumn by the lake
waves come and wash away
all footprints.
Sarah Paris

Haiku is neither analytic nor judgmental. There are no comparisons. Haiku, as opposed to much of traditional Western poetry, does not employ metaphor, but describes what is here and now.

Through white cotton fields,
lifting toward the sunset,
a golden river.
Richard Wright

Most of the time, haiku employs simple, descriptive words to describe an experience in the present ("cool evening", "spring rain", "grandmother's quilt"). Avoid judgmental words ("amazing", "frightening") or abstract concepts ("eternity", "consciousness".)

Because there is such emphasis in haiku writing on simple, direct experience, the impression is sometimes created that a haiku is merely a short description of a pretty image. This is incorrect. A haiku aims to convey a **deep, direct, non-dual experience**.

If the experience is missing, the result will be a superficial description, **not a haiku**.

An example:

The red carnation:
leaves are light and feathery,
it smells of earth.

Communion

If haiku is practiced with the goal of achieving non-dual consciousness, the concept of "communion" is an essential element. This element is inherent in Zen-influenced classic haiku, but not often stressed in Western haiku.

Haiku as a spiritual practice will reflect an increasingly **non-dualistic consciousness**. In the poem, this often manifests as two or more **different elements in communion through one force, one movement, one flow**.

The stillness:
Into the rock it pierces –
the cry of the cicada.
Bashō

Note the two elements (stillness, cry) inter-being in the same flow of energy (both the stillness and the cry of the cicada are experienced as "piercing the rock".)

Other examples:

Touching
the fishing line –
the summer moon.
Chiyo-ni

The tennis court is filled
with balls coming and going
and the butterfly.
T. Kawamata

Rain... Rain!
And countless frog's voices
fill the river
Anne Rees Anderson

B. The Techniques of Haiku Writing

1. Form

A haiku has three short lines with either:

- a) 2-3-2 accented syllables (plus any number of unaccented ones), or
- b) 5-7-5 syllables, or
- c) free verse.

Examples of 2-3-2 accented syllables (plus any number of unaccented ones):

May rainstorm –
flowers bend as snails
pass in procession
Janet Schroder

Listening with another
To the music of the mountain stream;
There is no other.
Hando

Many English-language haiku poets use a system of 5-7-5 syllables (accented or not). This system has the advantage of simplicity.

In the autumn dusk
A spider patiently darns
A hole in a wall.
Richard Wright

The system of 2-3-2 accented syllables offers the advantage of greater flexibility and more naturalness. The natural rhythm of English and English poetry arises from its accented syllables. This is very different from Japanese, where typically each syllable is accented.

How to decide which syllables are accented? Usually, by reciting the lines aloud, the accents become clear. However, in haiku, it is mainly meaning which determines whether a word will be accented or not.

Fresh new
cyclamen leaves are peeking through
the autumn soil.
Sheila Wyatt

Most of the time, articles (the, a, an), pronouns (he, you, this), conjunctions (and, but, when), prepositions (from, near) and helper verbs such as can, will, has, etc. do not carry accents.

Whether or not to use 2-3-2 accents or 5-7-5 syllables or simply three very short lines is up the individual. There are no right or wrongs or absolutes. All three forms are in common use in English-language haiku writing.

2. Present Tense

Because haiku deals with the present moment, haiku poetry is almost always written in the present or present perfect tense.

graduation ...
a thousand chairs wait in the
drizzling rain.
Mary Joyce

3. Language and Style

Haiku uses a minimum of words.

Old Pond
A frog jumps in –
sound of water.
Bashō

This is one of the most famous haiku ever written, and the last line in particular has been translated in many different ways to indicate "sound of water" (see: *One Hundred Frogs*, in the suggested reading list at the end of this document.) It also has spawned a host of haiku alluding to it:

Placid waters
sitting still and serene
waiting for the frog
Carolyn Franklin

NOTE: Sly humor, as in the above example, can be incorporated into haiku. However, haiku that are solely intended to be jokes (like the famous series of "spam haiku", or the equally popular series of haiku about computer breakdowns), are not actually considered *haiku*, but fall under the category of *senryu*, humorous haiku-style poetry.

Use evocative, specific, concrete words:

On the Snowmass slope
even the magpies on the fence
sit in silence
"Cistercian Monastery"
Hando

As in the above example, it is acceptable to use a title to indicate the context of the haiku.

Often, the words will convey layers of meaning:

Footprints in the sand
to here and there and nowhere
and the gull flying
Hando

Repetition of the same sound is often used to express a feeling:

A gray dawn
again, and again the call
of the mourning dove
Sarah Paris

Internal rhyme and alliteration can add to the beauty of a haiku.:

A long winter rain:
a whistling old man whittles
a dream on a stick
Richard Wright

NOTE: Rhymes at the end of lines, as in traditional Western poetry, are not typical of haiku and tend to sound out of place.

4. Traditional Techniques and Grammar

Classic Japanese haiku usually contain a word or phrase that indicates a specific season:

On the bare branch
the crow has settled
autumn evening
Bashō

Kireji – "pause" or "cutting" words – are often used in Japanese haiku to indicate uncertainty or a question or an accent. They are usually at the end of a line and heighten the emotion of the poem. In English, this effect is often produced by the use of punctuation. A semi-colon, for instance, cuts a sentence into two parts, with equal emphasis on both parts.

Last light
over the bay; the pelicans
are flying home
Sarah Paris

A dash (–) emphasizes and adds to what follows.

mackerel sky
at sunset – a scattering
of childhood dreams.
Pat Tompkins

Free grammatical structure is common, including abbreviation, free use/switching of subject-object, incomplete sentences, etc.

now only the sound
of snowflakes falling
New Year's morning
Barbara Campitelli

5. Presentation

Haiku, like most poetry, are meant to be *heard*, rather than *read* on a page. After writing a haiku down for the first time, it is helpful to read it aloud a few times and listen to how it sounds – this will often reveal whether or not the haiku "works".

When they are formally presented to a group, haiku are always ***read aloud twice***. This helps those who listen to get a better understanding – often, the deeper meaning is revealed only after hearing the haiku for the second time.

RECOMMENDED READING:

For a more detailed discussion of the elements and the craft of haiku writing, we especially recommend: ***Lee Gurga: Haiku: A Poet's Guide***

We also recommend:

- *Jane Reichhold: Writing and Enjoying Haiku*
- *Hiroaki Sato: One Hundred Frogs – From Renga to Haiku to English*
- *Clark Strand: Seeds from Birch Tree*
- *Paul O. Williams: The Nick of Time: Essays on Haiku Aesthetics*

The following three works are out of print but available used via bookfinder.com and amazon.com (and similar sources.) Blyth's books are considered rare, but your library (and the Mercy Center East-West library) may have a set.

- *Harold G. Henderson: Haiku in English*
- *Joan Giroux: The Haiku Form*
- *Robert Blyth: Haiku (four volumes)*

For readers interested in haiku in relation to Zen practice, we recommend:

- *Robert Aitken: A Zen Wave – Bashō's Haiku and Zen*

HANDO TAUGHT

- Remember that a haiku is a poem that expresses your experience of everyday life. Therefore, be attentive to the here and now.
- Contemplate even ordinary things and events closely. Unseen wonders will reveal themselves.
- Let yourself become one with that which you contemplate. Identify yourself with it.
- There is joy hidden in everything. "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." (Gerald Manley Hopkins)
- Then express your experience in three short lines. Keep working on your haiku until it says just what you want.
- However, always remember that your experience is the heart of haiku. Keep returning to your experience of life all the time you are working on your poem.

If you do all this, writing haiku will be a path to a fuller richer life!

⁴Hando was the Japanese name of Fr. Thomas Hand, S.J., who studied Japanese haiku during the 29 years he lived and worked in Japan. Hando taught the writing of English-language haiku both in Japan and the United States for many years, and he founded and led the Mercy Center Four Seasons Haiku Kai (haiku group) until his passing in 2005.

Many of the haiku in this guide were written by members of this group. The group continues to meet quarterly at Mercy Center, Burlingame, California and has published two volumes of haiku available at the Mercy Center bookstore.

Anyone interested in learning more about haiku is welcome to join us. For more information and to view a calendar of activities, visit www.mercy-center.org.

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