

## Haiku Silence

by Angelee Deodhar

So much has been written about how to haiku that I wonder if there is anything really left to say. More and more books on the art and craft of haiku are being written, and there are innumerable websites expressing opinions and publishing haiku by the score. Some of these are conflicting in content and leave even experienced poets bewildered.

For some time now, I have been asking myself the questions which every haiku poet asks, where does one begin? What is the quality of a good haiku? Does the fact that a haiku is published mean that it is a good one? What does a haiku really mean? In my studies, over the last fourteen years, I have yet to understand a lot of things about haiku. When I was asked to contribute an essay for *Simply Haiku* I pondered over what to write. Many people, venerable teachers and editors of prestigious haiku magazines, have written so much already. Is there anything I can add? Having thought about it I felt I could share one insight, which for me, is the single most important affirmation towards a “haiku mind”, if we can call it that.

R.H. Blyth in the *History of Haiku Vol. 1* lists thirteen characteristics of the Zen state of mind required for the creation and appreciation of haiku: Selflessness, Loneliness, Grateful Acceptance, Wordlessness, Non-Intellectuality, Contradiction, Humour, Freedom, Non-Morality, Simplicity, Materiality, Love and Courage. Not being a follower of Zen I don't know if I can add anything to this exhaustive list. Tom Clausen, in his fine essay “A Haiku way of Life”, lists his own additional thirteen characteristics as Faith, Sharing, Discipline, Concision, Solitude, Humility, Awareness, Ritual, Creativity, Centering, Truthfulness, Curiosity and Patience. I am sure most of us have some criteria we can add to these lists. One does not have to be a practitioner of Zen to write haiku. For me these characteristics all begin and end in what I term “Haiku Silence”.

The noise of the world drowns out so much. Most of us cannot leave home and set up residence near a pond as Thoreau did, but one can empathize with what he wrote. Most of us have jobs to attend to, classes to teach, bills to pay, meals to cook, meetings to attend, speeches to make. To experience silence and solitude, setting aside the baggage of negative connotations that may be associated with “non-doing”, can be very challenging. How then do we, in spite of it all, write haiku? By returning to silence. By going on a journey deep within ourselves, to find a safe quiet place where the winds and gusts of everyday affairs do not trouble us, where, in silence, we can find our own natures in tune with nature around us. Silence is not the absence of sound; by listening with ones' whole being, one can discover the silence within.

Dr. Eric Amman, in describing haiku, used the term “wordless poem”. If something is wordless how do we communicate it? How do we convey the depth of feeling of that particular moment to someone far away in time and place? How then does a haiku, the wordless poem, work when put into words? Let us examine one of his own poems which leaves so much unsaid . . .

The names of the dead  
sinking deeper and deeper  
into the red leaves

—Eric Amman, *The Haiku Anthology*

Can haiku silence be expressed? Yes! Whenever I read a haiku which resonates for me, I ask, where did this originate? How has the person who wrote it communicated almost wordlessly that quietude? To illustrate this I will use two examples :

summer stillness  
the play of light and shadow  
on the wind chimes

—Peggy Willis Lyles, *The Haiku Anthology*

Quiet afternoon:  
water shadows  
on the pine bark

—Anita Virgil, *The Haiku Anthology*

Let us look at another example:

stillness  
sand sifts through the roots  
of a fallen tree

—Con Van Dan Heuvel, *The Haiku Anthology*

Here one can actually see how these haiku work, there is a silent communion of peace, because of the poets' stillness we pause, beauty pervades our consciousness, so also the play of light on wind chimes or shadows on the bark of the tree and the sand sifting through the roots of the fallen tree bring to us timeless images.

another year  
the tallest trees shade  
the oldest headstones

—DeVar Dahl, Volume XVII, June 2004, *Haiku Canada Newsletter*

Stillness is a prerequisite for any creative art but more so for haiku. It is interesting to note that although Basho was a renku master. He frequently went away to find himself. Was his journey to the interior just a travelogue, or was it more? Here are three excellent examples of tranquility and quietude, in the spirit of Basho:

summer  
trickles noiselessly down  
the moss-covered stone

—Christopher Herold, *a path in the garden*

from winter storage  
the prow of a canoe  
entering sunlight

—Jerry Kilbride, *The Haiku Anthology*

morning bird song-  
my paddle slips  
into its reflection

—Michael Dylan Welch, *The Haiku Anthology*

Most of us are too busy churning out haiku trying to get published in one journal or another, sending in entries to contests or posting to various lists. It amazes me to see such frenetic activity. I agree with Zinovy when he writes,

On my palm  
a lifeline wrinkled  
with future deadlines

—Zinovy Vayman, *Modern Haiku*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1, Winter- Spring, 2002

While it is good to learn by exchanging ideas about how to write better haiku and join discussion groups, for me the main aim of writing haiku is to get to the center of my silence. Although that silence may well be interrupted . . .

time to quit  
I hear the bell  
before the bell

—LeRoy Gorman, *Modern Haiku*, Vol.33.2, Summer 2002

silent prayer –  
the quiet humming  
of the ceiling fan

—Lee Gurga, *The Haiku Anthology*

Does it mean that we should become hermits? No, not necessarily, but what will help is to develop a special quality of silent communion with oneself. Before one starts to put pen to paper, one must get quiet. It does not matter if we are commuting on a train, waiting in a doctor's office, or at the airport. To write well we must bring our conscious selves into a state of silent graceful acceptance of everything around us. Here is a haiku which qualifies what I mean.

desert spring –  
nothing, nothing in the world  
but this full moon

—William J. Higginson, *Modern Haiku*, Vol.33.2, Summer 2002

The late Robert Spiess, a long time editor of *Modern Haiku*, in his “Speculations” has said, “Another reason for the brevity of haiku is that the more words the more distance, the more silence the more proximity.” With just a few words Harter, Clausen and Swede have skillfully captured that noiselessness in their haiku,

meteor shower –  
the glimmer  
of the surf

—Penny Harter, *Modern Haiku*, Vol.33.2, Summer 2002

once  
everyone is gone . . .  
the clock

—Tom Clausen, *Albatross*, Vol. V, No. 1, 1996

alone at last  
i wonder where  
everyone is

—George Swede, *The Haiku Anthology*

Spieß also cautions us, “Chuang Tzu said, ‘If you have insight, you use your inner eye, your inner ear, to pierce to the heart of things, and have no need of intellectual knowledge.’ This is how haiku poets should proceed in their endeavours. “

abandoned garden-  
following the scent  
of the hidden jasmine

—Ion Codrescu, *Mountain Voices*

the long night . . .  
a light rain  
beats time on the cook pots

—Jim Kacian, *Albatross*, Vol. VII, No. 2, 1998

quiet evening,  
a spider moves its shadow  
across the wall

—Tom Clausen, *Albatross*, Vol. VII, No. 2, 1998

Sri Ramana Maharshi said: “Silence is never-ending speech. Vocal speech obstructs the other speech of silence. In silence one is in intimate contact with the surroundings. Language is only a medium for communicating one’s thoughts to another. Silence is ever speaking.” How well this is illustrated in this haiku:

temple yard the sound of stone buddhas

—Stanford M. Forrester, *still*, Vol.5, No.2, Spring 2001

Here the poet is at peace with himself, with his surroundings, with the world at large and in that silence he too becomes a buddha. And so also in the next haiku, we experience tranquility,

silence  
the snow-covered rock  
under winter stars

—Bruce Ross, *The Haiku Anthology*

Let us go deep into our own space to discover what it is that we belong to.

ikebana  
the space  
where the lily was

—Pamela Miller Ness, from the leaflet *where the lily was*

One must embrace silence and solitude to realize its full potential. In the next two haiku one sinks into deep tranquility,

deep in this world  
of Monet water lilies . . .  
no sound

—Elizabeth Searle Lamb, *Across the Windharp, Collected and New haiku*

marble koi . . .  
the silence  
of lotus blossoms

—Pamela A. Babusci, *Evergreen*, Vol. X111, No. 5, May 2003

How can we fully feel a moment's essence if the mind is jumping from one thought to another? In a state of alertness, true awareness cannot occur unless we are in a mode of stillness. John Stevenson's haiku puts it so succinctly,

a useless novelty -  
each of us already has  
a chattering skull

—John Stevenson, *Modern Haiku*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1 Winter-Spring 2001

Recently, on one of the kukai lists of which I am a member, I wrote to the webmaster that this time none of the haiku impressed me or brought an 'aha' moment, and he very gently reminded me that our response depends upon what we bring to a haiku. What a revelation it was! I had used my chattering skull instead of my silent self and missed appreciating the haiku. Therefore the reading of haiku and their appreciation also requires an alert passivity.

I end this simple essay with a haiku which I keep on my table to remind me to write in such a manner that I (the host) can, through haiku, share with you (my guest) as pure a silence as that of the white chrysanthemum . . .

Silent communion  
Between the guest,  
The host, and the white chrysanthemum  
—Oshima Ryota

I have specially used non-Japanese, contemporary English language haiku to emphasize the point I am making about Haiku Silence. There are so many other haiku which I could have quoted to illustrate Haiku Silence, but since space is limited, I invite each one of you who visit *Simply Haiku* to share your haiku silence with me.

I thank all those who so generously gave me their permission to use their haiku and am grateful to the Editors of *Simply Haiku* for giving me the opportunity to share my views. Thank you.

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Works cited:

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**Angelee Deodhar** is a haiku poet and artist from India. She has a keen interest in promoting haiku and its related forms throughout the world. Her artwork is a form of modern digital haiga. She tells us that it provides her with an opportunity to share different cultural perspectives with a view to improved friendships among haijin.

Her haiku and haiga have been published internationally in various books, journals and on the Internet.

She is a member of several haiku groups worldwide, the chief among them being the Haiku Society of America, Haiku Society of Canada, and Haiku International Association-Japan, Meguro International Friendship Association-Japan, Evergreen Haiku Society-Japan and the World Haiku Association-Japan.

In her work life, Angelee is an eye surgeon, a member of International Arts Medicine Association and is published in medical magazines. She lives in Chandigarh with her physician husband, a son and two dogs.

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