

from
THE PATH TO MATSUYAMA

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On Receiving the Masaoka Shiki International Haiku Grand Prize
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I was from a proud, somewhat educated farming and working family. After finishing college I went back to work. I went into the National Forests to be an isolated fire lookout living in a tiny cabin on the top of a peak. I worked as a summertime firefighter and wilderness ranger, and then spent winters in San Francisco to be closer to a community of writers.

I discovered the four-volume set of haiku translations by R.H. Blyth that now we all know so well. Reading the four Blyth volumes gave me my first clear sense of the marvelous power of haiku. (The other reading of that era that helped shape my life was books by D.T. Suzuki.) I lived with Blyth's translations for a long time, and began to be able to see our North American landscapes in the light of haiku sensibility (which of course includes the human.) When I ran across Bashô's great instruction "To learn of the pine tree, go to the pine" my path was set.

In the fall of 1953 I moved to Berkeley and entered as a graduate student in East Asian Languages at the University of California. I read Chinese poetry with Dr. Chen Shih-hsiang and translated poems of the Chinese Zen poet Han-shan/Kanzan. I studied Japanese with Dr. Donald Shively.

This was 1954. Through Dr. Shively I got to know the formidable American Buddhist scholar Ruth F. Sasaki, who had been married to the Japanese Zen Master Sasaki Shigetsu. They had met before World War II when he was teaching Rinzaï Zen in a little zendô zend in New York City. He died during the war. Mrs. Sasaki returned to Kyoto after the war to continue her Zen training with Sasaki Shigetsu's Dharma brother Gotô Zuigan Roshi. She was also hard at work translating and publishing Zen texts. She offered to help me get to Kyoto, saying that it would deepen my knowledge of Japanese and Chinese, and give me an opportunity for first-hand Rinzaï Zen practice. Just as I was preparing to leave the West Coast I got involved with the literary circles that are now remembered as the "Beat Generation" in San Francisco. I participated in poetry readings and had some minor publications. Those early poems already show the influence of haiku with strong short verses contained within longer poems. This was a strategy that came to me through W.C. Williams and Ezra Pound.

I first arrived in Japan in May of 1956. Exposure to Buddhist scholars and translators soon brought me to the Zenrinkushû, that remarkable anthology of bits and pieces of Chinese poetry plus a number of folk proverbs as they became used within the Zen world as part of the training dialog. If one was looking at the possibilities of "short poems" the Zenrinkushû practice of breaking up Chinese poems would certainly have to be included. R.H. Blyth famously said "The Zenrinkushû is Chinese poetry on its way to becoming haiku." Maybe it is that somebody — one of the old Zen monk editors — realized that practically all poems are too long and that they'd be better if they were cut up. So he cut up hundreds of Chinese poems and came out with new, shorter poems! I now know I was extremely fortunate to have been exposed to the elegant "Zen culture" aspects of Kyoto. But as I traveled around Japan I came to thoroughly appreciate popular culture, ordinary people's lives, and the brave irreverent progressive vitality of postwar Japanese life. I realized that the spirit of haiku comes as much from that daily-life spirit as it does from "high culture" — and still, haiku is totally refined.

One of my friends from early Kyoto days was Dr. Burton Watson. He was on Mrs. Ruth Sasaki's translation team at Daitôku-ji in the late fifties, working on Zen texts, as well as his own projects. I joined that team as an assistant. He has lived in Japan almost continuously since that time, maintaining affiliations with Columbia University. He is without question the world's premier translator from both Chinese and Japanese into English. Only long years of friendship allow me to call him Burt. Though I had read translations of Shiki before, it was Dr. Watson's versions of Shiki published by Columbia University Press in 1997 that enabled me to fully appreciate him. Janine Beichman wrote *Masaoka Shiki: His Life and Works*, first published in 1982, but I didn't read Beichman's book until after my exciting exposure to Shiki through Dr. Watson. We English/American language speakers are fortunate to have these two excellent books to give us access to a man who was

a giant in the world of haiku poetry. (Watson did a volume of translations of another poet of Matsuyama City, Taneda Santōka, that was also published by Columbia University Press, in 2003. It is titled *For All My Walking*. It is a Walking delightful volume.)

I continued to live and study in Kyoto until 1968. My ability to speak and read Japanese improved a bit, though I am still embarrassed by how clumsy I am with this elegant language. I managed to read haiku in the original just enough to comprehend that the power of haiku poetry is not only from clear images, or vivid presentation of the moment, or transcendent insight into nature and the world, but in a marvelous creative play with the language. Poetry always comes down to language — if the choice of words, the tricks of the syntax, are not exactly right, whatever other virtues a piece of writing might have, it is not a poem. (These are the standards we apply to poetry in each our own language. Poems in translation of course can not be judged this way. “Images” however are translatable.)

I returned to North America in 1968 (Some of us prefer to call it “Turtle Island” after Native American creation stories). In 1970 I moved with my family to a remote plot of forest land in the Sierra Nevada at the 1,000-meter elevation — pine and oak woods. We built a house and have made that our home base ever since.

Having a “home base” for my wife and family made it possible to go on periodic trips over the years doing lectures, readings, and workshops. Honoring the haiku sensibility, I look for what would be the seasonal signals, kigo, in our Mediterranean middle-elevation Sierra mountain landscape. What xeric aromatic herbs and flowers, what birds, what weather signals, will we find? They are different from Japan. I read translations of the myths and tales of the Native people who once lived where I live now, from the Nisenan language (which is no longer spoken) and I can see how much they valued the magic of the woodpecker, the sly character of fox, and the trickster coyote. High-flying migratory sandhill cranes pass north and south in the spring and in the fall directly over my house. They have been doing this for at least a million years.

The Euro-, African-, and Asian-Americans are just a little more than 200 years on the west coast of North America, and it will be several centuries yet before our poetic vocabulary matches the land. The haiku tradition gives us the pointers that we need to begin this process, which will be part of making a culture and a home in North America (and I hope eventually, for all people, a home on planet earth) for the long future ahead.

The ancient Buddhist teaching of non-harming and respect for all of nature, (which is quietly present within the haiku tradition) is an ethical precept we are in greater need of now than ever, as the explosive energy of the modern industrial world pushes relentlessly toward an endless exploitation of all the resources of the planet.

Now I want to go back to talking about how Japanese haiku poetry has been discovered world-wide. Up till now I have been speaking of haiku as it exists in Japan from early times up to the present. Though haiku may be considered old fashioned and conservative by some people in Japan, in the rest of the world it is received as fresh, new, experimental, youthful and playful, unpretentious, and available to students and beginners who want to try out a poetic way of speaking.

As we all know there’s scarcely a literate culture on earth that doesn’t have some translations of Japanese haiku in its poetry anthologies. From this, an international non-Japanese haiku movement has begun, which takes the idea of haiku hundreds of new directions. School teachers in Denmark, Italy, or California have no hesitation giving translations of Japanese haiku to their students, and then also reading locally-written brief poems to them, telling the children to look around, see what they see, have a thought, make an image, and write their own brief poem. Children everywhere are learning about poetry and themselves just this way. Though this may not be entirely true to the haiku tradition itself, it is of immense value to young people to have their language and imagination liberated. Short poems and haiku inspire them more than the usual English or European-language poetry which always seems (to children) either too metrical and formal or too modern and experimental.

The haiku tradition is now part of a world-wide experimental movement in freshly teaching poetry in the schools. This is another reason to celebrate haiku. As a teacher in the graduate creative writing program at the University of California at Davis, I taught the haiku tradition to older students on a serious poetry-writing track, using Robert Hass’s superb book *The Essential Haiku*, and it was as surprising and useful to these sophisticated young adults as to any schoolchild. Haiku amazingly reaches every class, every age.

Eventually somehow I became known as a poet. My poetic work has had many influences: Scotch-English traditional ballads and folksongs, William Blake, Classical Chinese poetry, Walt Whitman, Robinson Jeffers, Ezra Pound, Native American songs and poems, haiku, Noh drama, Zen sayings, Federico Garcia Lorca, and much more. The influence from haiku and from the Chinese is, I think, the deepest, but I rarely talk about it. Though not a “haiku poet” I have written a number of brief poems, some of which may approach the haiku aesthetic. They also

fit into a larger project which I call "Mountains and Rivers Without End" in which I am searching for ways to talk about the natural landscapes and old myths and stories of the whole planet. I am sure I have bitten off far too much, and my poetry might be better if someone just cut it up into little pieces.

Over the years I have made many trips to Japan, and continued to learn from contemporary Japanese poets, especially Tanikawa Shuntarô, Ōoka Makoto, and Sakaki Nanao — Nanao is a truly unique figure. The contemporary Korean poet Ko Un's very short Zen (Korean Son)-inspired poems are hugely pleasurable and very subtle. I enjoyed getting to know the haiku of Dr. Arima Akito through the translations of Miyashita Emiko and Lee Gurga.

Before I wind this up, I want to share with you the pleasure I take in a just a few of Masaoka Shiki's haiku (I could cite many more.) For example,

inazuma ya / tarai no soko no / wasure-mizu

Lightning flash—
in the bottom of the basin,
water someone forgot to throw out

—which I remember almost every time I bend over and wash my face, hoping for a flash of light ! —and,

yuki nokoru / itadaki hitotsu / kuni-zakai

A single peak,
snow still on it—
that's where the province ends

because from where I live (which is in the mountains of California) there is a mountain not too far to the east forever with springtime snow. I always think "beyond that is the desert state of Nevada" — and remember Shiki. But perhaps most interesting for me is this:

nehanzô / hotoke hitori / waraikeri

Picture of the Buddha
Entering Nirvana
One person is laughing !

When I was a Zen student in Kyoto my teacher once gave me a little testing koan which was "In the Buddha's Nirvana-picture, everyone is crying. Why are they crying?" Some years later I find Shiki's nehanzô haiku and I can never stop laughing. What a fresh mind he had ! (All the above translations are by Burton Watson.)

To finish up: Yves Bonnefoy in his excellent presentation here in 2000 said that we in the Occident are not experiencing "a kind of haiku fashion" but an awakening to a necessary and fundamental reference, which can only remain at the center of Western poetic thought." And he goes on to say, that all these exchanges are for the "greater good of poetry, which is our common good and one of the few means that remain for preserving society from the dangers that beset it."

It is quite to be expected that Mr. Bonnefoy and myself, French and American, each in our own way, invoke haiku as a benefit and a value in matters of the troubled world today. People are always asking "what's the use of poetry?" The mystery of language, the poetic imagination, and the mind of compassion, are roughly one and the same, and through poetry perhaps they can keep guiding the world toward occasional moments of peace, gratitude, and delight. One hesitates to ask for more.

