

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

A Plop! Heard “’Round the World”

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What makes Bashō one of the greatest of the poets of the world is the fact that he lived the poetry he wrote, and wrote the poetry he lived.¹

R. H. Blyth (1898–1964)

CAN ANYTHING new be written about Bashō (1644–1694)? Even two decades ago, Ueda already felt intimidated by the “huge accumulated mass” of daunting Bashō scholarship. He concluded that non-Japanese readers of Bashō would be the ones who now had the greatest opportunity to make novel contributions.² Did my reading of words such as these encourage the writing of this essay, with its attempt to stimulate further discussion?

No. In the interest of full disclosure, I confess that this essay’s motivations began in an experience I had over eight decades ago. I grew up in the city. Not until I visited my uncle’s farm at the age of nine did I first hear that distinctive “plop!” It arose from a region several yards away. There, a pool lay hidden beyond the bend of a gentle meadow stream. What caused that curious sound? I went there, saw nothing, and remained mystified. Days later, I finally saw a frog leap into this water, and, simultaneously, heard what happened. This sudden comprehension solved the mystery. The deep impression it left remains with me to this day.

¹ Blyth 1963, p. 129.

² Ueda 1991, p. 9.

Poetry? What does it have to do with Zen? Let's begin with the old Japanese expression: "Poetry and Zen are one" (Jp. *shizen ichimi*). You might not want to write poetry yourself. Yet, by the poet Marianne Moore's criteria, you may still be considered someone who's interested in poetry as long as you demand two things: (1) The experience of the raw material of poetry "in all its rawness," and (2) Genuine poetic expression.³

If you are also a minimalist, these expectations might lead you into the spare verses of haiku. And then, inevitably toward Bashō, whose frog-"plop!" is still being heard around the world.

In these next pages we take a neural perspective to examine the evidence, pro and con, that Zen sensibilities came to mature in the later life and literary work of this man born as Matsuo Kinsaku in 1644.

PART I: A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Poets as Literary Revolutionaries

Large gaps still remain in our understanding of the man later known by his pen name, Matsuo Bashō. We do know that he accomplished much during a life shortened to only five decades. Earlier centuries of Japanese poetry had resulted in only *ordinary* croaks.⁴ In the spring of 1686, Bashō became the first poet who immortalized the raw, distinctive, frog-water sound. Moreover, before he arrived, the 5-7-5 form of Japanese poetry "had largely been an entertaining game."⁵ Soon, Bashō would help lead the literary revolution that rescued the haiku from the artificialities infiltrating the sonnet in Western verse.⁶

Sounds travel far. Echoes relay the message. A century and a half later, a longer poem was also becoming well known, on the other side of the world. Its author was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882). Emerson, like Bashō, was not only a keen observer of nature, but also a writer who helped to inspire a literary revolution in his own country. Emerson's poem ("The Concord Hymn") dramatized no natural sound. Instead, it echoed the first shot fired "by the rude bridge" at Concord, Massachusetts. That pivotal sound, back in the spring of 1775, was also far-reaching in import. Indeed, it was the herald of international revolutionary trends still going on today, of echoes that still keep being "heard 'round the world."

³ Miller 1976, p. 211.

⁴ Oseko 1990, p. 43.

⁵ Ueda 1991, p. 3.

⁶ Stryk 1985, p. 9.

Reginald Horace Blyth Examines Haiku and Their Relation to the Practice of Zen

In 1963, Blyth published the first of his two major volumes on haiku. It surveyed the centuries-long history of haiku and devoted twenty-four pages to the section on Bashō. Following this were seventy-five pages about the poet's closest disciples and others who were members of the already large Bashō school. Given the old saying about poetry and Zen, and because Bashō was a lay student of Zen Buddhism, Blyth sought answers to two questions: Did Zen influence Bashō's poetry? And, does poetry help us to understand Zen?

Blyth began this analysis with two cogent quotations by Bernard Phillips: “Zen practice is at bottom the act of giving one's self, of entering wholly into one's actions. . . . One must enter into the practice and become one with it, so that it is no longer an action performed by a doer who is external to the action.”⁷ Then, Blyth used nine words to distill his own version of the intimate relationships between Zen, poetry, and haiku: in Zen, he said, “Doer is deed;” in poetry, “Word is thing;” in haiku, “Meaning is sensation.”⁸ Pause . . . allow these nine words to incubate . . .

It now becomes essential to ask why Blyth also ventured one crucial statement. Why did he conclude that when Bashō's haiku flowered during his later years, this later period marked “the beginning and the end of the poetry of the thing in itself?”⁹ What is “the thing in itself”? How could Bashō's poetry be oriented toward a concept this abstract? The following paragraphs help clarify a major Self/Other theme.

The phrase, “*Ding an sich*,” is associated with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). It is beyond our present scope to explore every philosophical implication of these three German words. However, the phrase does help conceptualize how the noumenon (or suchness) might co-exist in its relationships with one's personal Self.¹⁰ Concepts that distinguish between “the Other” (outside) and the Self (inside) are not only grounded in neurobiology, they are fundamental in understanding Zen teachings. So, is there some simpler way to understand Blyth's nine words and his conclusion? Is there also a way to grasp how we and Bashō—stuck inside our own personal human frame of reference—are the “doers” responsible for re-creating each

⁷ Blyth 1963, pp. 4, 5.

⁸ Ibid., p. 8.

⁹ Blyth 1964, p. 332.

¹⁰ Austin 2006, pp. 361–71.

meaningful “sensation” that arises when stimuli enter us from each “thing” out there in that other world outside our own skin?

These intricate issues become more tractable when they are approached from a simplified model of brain anatomy and physiology.¹¹ From this practical neural perspective, we have seen that our normal consciousness is based on its two major frames of reference: (1) Self, and (2) Other. Our perspective from this first compartment can arise only with reference to the internal axis of our omni-Self. At the same time, that other compartment represents, *anonymously*, the exterior world as occupying the space “outside” of our skin. These two Self/Other categories are implicit in the blend that begins to interpret our everyday notions of “reality.” Unfortunately, these concepts and their implications are hard to grasp, and harder to remember.

Please notice, however, how much extra weight we give to our own, subjective, Self-centered constructs. The mergers in our sense of “reality” remain asymmetrical, unbalanced. Why does our basic egocentric bias remain so dominant, so intrusive? Because this first, Self-centered frame of reference is itself built on two huge sub-sets of distributed functions. The Greeks called them our soma and psyche. To each sub-set of our Self, we assign the highest of priorities.

The first sub-set of our normal egocentric bias is easiest to recognize. It’s tangible. We refer all its percepts back to the physical axis of our own body (our soma). You can demonstrate this by touching and pinching your own arm. Notice how you feel your sensations converging on you. In contrast, the second sub-set in our bias is not so easy to pin down. These Self-centered, subjective thoughts and allied mental operations of our psyche are intangible. You can’t touch any thought, although the longings and loathings within your psychic Self express emotions that can leave you feeling uncomfortable.

A second frame of reference exists. Its other frame of reference offers a sharp contrast. Its function is to represent any “thing” in that huge world outside our skin. This other version of “reality” arises within subordinate networks. They receive a lower priority. Still, they may seem more objective. Why? Because their covert functions emerge anonymously. What happens in the brain when this second category of anonymous neural codes perceives signals from things out there—from items out in that other world of space

¹¹ Austin 2013a, pp. 1–9.

outside our skin? It assigns those “things in themselves” to “their” own 3-D spatial relationships, not to lines of sight that converge on our own Self. A separate term helps to define such an “Other-centered” kind of attentive processing. It is called allo-centric. In Greek, “allo” means other.

Ordinary consciousness blends both ego- and allo-centric physiologies seamlessly. Diagrammatically, this strong Self-centered bias of our psyche and soma can be represented as: ego >>> allo.

This neural perspective helps clarify why Blyth found that Bashō’s later poetry was so oriented toward “the thing in itself.” In short, Blyth recognized that Bashō’s later haiku tended to drop the subjective frame of reference. No longer did it point back toward some human author. Instead, these haiku were opening outward. They were perceiving other things, just as they existed, more objectively, outside in that world at large. Out there, these other things drew attention to themselves. Those former notions of “My Self” were finally taking a subordinate role. Now, allo >>> ego. In this detached form of poetic expression, haiku ventures toward the ineffable, the inexpressible.¹²

Comment

Suppose you and I also let go of our unfruitful subjectivities. Suppose we drop not only the maladaptive aversive responses of our old fearful Self, but also let go of every excessive longing that had dominated our habitual approach behavior. Could this liberate some more positive behavioral options, some mature behaviors formerly out of sight among the instinctual networkings of our brain? D. T. Suzuki called these our basic, “native virtues.”¹³ Multiple affirmative potentials are inherent when we let go of our precious Self in this liberating manner. They include authentic forms of compassion.

Meanwhile, we notice the restraint with which Blyth deferred his English translation of Bashō’s overly-familiar haiku. Not until the final chapter of his second volume would readers finally find all the lines of the haiku they’d been waiting for, its luster undimmed by earlier, partial translations:

An old pond;
a frog jumps in:
the sound of the water¹⁴

¹² Austin 2006, pp. 358–61.

¹³ Austin 1998, pp. 648–53.

¹⁴ Blyth 1964, p. 349.

Robert Aitken Examines the Question: Was Bashō's Maturation as a Person Expressed in His Poetry?

When the United States entered World War II, Robert Aitken was a civilian working on Guam. Captured by the Japanese, he was interned at a camp in Kobe. There, fortunately, he happened to find one co-internee who would become, he said, “like a father in helping me to find my life path.”¹⁵ Inspired by Blyth, Aitken returned to Japan after the war, embarked on the Path of authentic Zen Buddhism with Yamada Kōun Rōshi and other teachers, and matured into the founding leader of an extended Zen sangha based in Hawaii, a socially-engaged Buddhist *rōshi*, and an internationally-known author.

In 1978, in *A Zen Wave*, Aitken developed his own analysis of Bashō. It was informed by a rare combination of key attributes: a thorough first-hand Zen perspective as both student and teacher, a working ability to translate Japanese, and a scholarly understanding of the relevant literature. These capacities enabled Aitken to envision the sound-image of a frog entering water as an event resonating within the immensity of an Indra's-net-like universe. In the context of this co-reflective universe, what we humans are, what we hear and see, and all other phenomena, are viewed as co-participants. Aitken could regard the scope of this boundless universe as “a complementarity of empty infinity, intimate interrelationships, and total uniqueness of each and every being.”¹⁶

Aitken devotes his first chapter to the “old pond” haiku. He comments that its fame, after more than three hundred years of repetition, had understandably become a little stale among Japanese-speaking people. However, he also points out one advantage of this situation: those who read it in English now have “something of an edge in any effort to see it freshly.”¹⁷ Can today's search for a fresh, neural perspective take us to such an edge? It can, when we overcome an initial resistance to unfamiliar words in Greek and German, and new concepts in neurobiology.

Speculating, Aitken envisions the setting for this haiku—a large overgrown pond in some public garden. He imagines Bashō there, “lost in the samadhi of an old pond,” during twilight in late spring.¹⁸ A caveat: “samadhi” is open to several interpretations.¹⁹ Were we to constrain one of its current meanings to a state of one-pointed absorption, then samadhi would usually

¹⁵ Aitken 2003, p. ix.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. xviii–xix.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 473–78.

refer to only a preliminary state of consciousness with no lasting potential to deeply transform a person. Here, however, Aitken prefers a broader interpretation of the word, one that could have a greater potential to transform.²⁰ When he writes that Bashō “changed with that plop,” he invites readers to conclude that this change represents a deeper, alternate state of consciousness. Such a change—in the direction of *kenshō*-satori—would signify that Bashō had dropped into a much more advanced state of awakening.

Why does Zen Buddhism emphasize these extraordinary states of insight? Because they can help transform a person’s over-conditioned, unskillful traits of character. Other potential assets of Zen training are being increasingly recognized. When covert resources of attentive processing are applied flexibly, they can contribute to a further expansion of a person’s creative potentials, about which that person remains unaware.

But can a mere sensate stimulus (one perceived as giving rise to a “sensation” in Blyth’s triad of words) spark deep, hidden links to “meaning,” enabling even a “plop!” to precipitate a major alternate state of consciousness? That mysterious sound of a frog certainly kindled my childish curiosity. But could it also strike a chord that would trigger a grown man into such a major physiological reaction?

Can a Sensory Stimulus Precipitate Kenshō-Satori? Remote Historical Evidence

Many examples in the old Chan and Zen literature testify to this fact: triggering stimuli, especially sounds, can precipitate major alternate states of consciousness. Plausible neural explanations suggest that when such stimuli strike a sensitized brain they instantly become salient in ways that cause deep normal shifting mechanisms to topple over.²¹

Aitken Rōshi points to the example of Xiangyan Zhixian (Jp. Kyōgen Chikan; d. 898).²² As this monk was sweeping around the grave of National Teacher Nanyang Huizong (675–775), his broom suddenly dislodged a tile stone. It flew on to strike a nearby bamboo stalk. The resulting “tock!” precipitated Xiangyan into a deeply enlightened state of consciousness. This state resolved the essence of a certain koan (Ch. *gong’an*) about the deep meaning of one’s “original face,” one which he could not penetrate previously. The next section offers further comments on this koan.

²⁰ Aitken 2003, p. 6.

²¹ Austin 1998, pp. 241–42, 452–57; Austin 2009, pp. 109–17, 189–93.

²² Aitken 2003, p. 5.

Did a Triggering Sound Stimulus Actually Precipitate a State of Awakening in Bashō? More Recent Sources of Information

In 1759, a painting by Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1769) portrayed Bashō with his “old pond” poem. Hakuin’s accompanying ideograms (in Chinese) suggested that this master poet had “dropped off mind and body” when he heard a frog jump into the water.²³ This phrase echoes “dropping off body and mind,” a phrase associated with awakening when used earlier by Zen Master Dōgen (1200–1253). What does such a letting go of one’s somatic and psychic Self imply? It means entering the advanced state of awakening, during which both of these egocentric sub-sets vanish from the field of consciousness. Notice again that this dropping off of one’s Self-centered body and mind still spares the Other, allo-centric frame of reference. Now all things in themselves can dominate the entire field of consciousness.

Master Hakuin painted this only seven decades or so after Bashō wrote his “old pond” haiku. Hakuin was an exacting judge of character. Was his brush just playing with the early stirrings of the legends that some might later refer to as part of the “Bashō myth”?²⁴ Or, did Hakuin already have access to more facts than we’re aware of—details and dates that convinced him Bashō really did undergo such a dramatic change when he heard that frog-water sound?

In the last century, D. T. Suzuki added a different version of the frog “story.”²⁵ He did not identify its source. Nor did he specify precisely where, when, or why the details of its several constituent events could have taken place. However, the “story” narrates a conversation that Bashō was said to have had with his teacher. On this occasion, he was visited by (or visited) his Rinzai Zen teacher, Butchō (1643–1715). Bashō had studied Zen under this teacher’s guidance at the temple Chōkeiji in Edo sometime between 1673 and 1684,²⁶ or 1681 and 1684.²⁷ As this story begins, Butchō asked his student-friend a conventional opening question that has Zen overtones: “How are you getting on these days?” To his teacher, Bashō replied: “After the recent rain the moss has grown greener than ever.”

Suzuki then says that Butchō “shot a second verbal arrow” to probe the depths of Bashō’s spiritual understanding: “What Buddhism is there even before the moss has grown greener?” This kind of question addresses the “Big Picture.” It is equivalent to asking a student: Where are you on the

²³ Addiss 2012, p. 172.

²⁴ Shirane 1998, pp. 30–51.

²⁵ Suzuki 1973, pp. 238–43.

²⁶ Hamill 1999, p. 180.

²⁷ Reichhold 2008, p. 409.

Path in particular relation to the universal, timeless, undifferentiated absolute?²⁸

At this point, in Suzuki's account, Bashō is alleged to have answered: "A frog jumps into the water, and hear the sound!" (*sic*). Suzuki suggests that at some moment when "Bashō himself was altogether effaced from his consciousness," this water sound was heard "as filling the entire universe."²⁹ When a witness tries to describe such an advanced state, a state that both effaces the Self and opens into such inclusive phenomena, it is important not to dismiss their wordy attempts. Nor should either of these two overlapping categories of direct experience be confused with metaphysical notions, metaphors, or symbols, or with simple poetic license of the "'round the world" kind. Instead, when a sound seems to expand this far beyond its usual boundaries it can have authentic neurophysiological correlates.³⁰

Suzuki goes on to inquire, what made this "old pond" haiku of Bashō so "revolutionary"? Why did such a revolution mark "the beginning of modern haiku poetry"? We must read between the lines, he says, because here is where Bashō's revolution begins. Where? In the deep structure of meaning hidden in the background of this verse. It originates in Bashō's "insight into the nature of life itself, or into the life of nature. He really penetrated into the depths of the whole creation, and what he saw there came out as depicted in his haiku on the old pond."³¹

To help clarify what such a deep insight means, Suzuki then explains that a haiku does not express ideas. Instead, a haiku "puts forward images reflecting intuitions. These images are not figurative representations made use of by the poetic mind." Instead, "they directly point to original intuitions," and "are intuitions themselves."³²

Suzuki postulates that Bashō had a direct experience that arose from such intuitive depths,³³ one that "was given an expressive utterance in his haiku."³⁴

²⁸ Aitken 2003, p. 76. Aitken discusses such an issue in a different haiku.

²⁹ Suzuki 1973, p. 228.

³⁰ Austin 2013b.

³¹ Suzuki 1973, pp. 239–40.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 240.

³³ I interpret such "depths" as corresponding with known neurobiological facts. From this perspective, they represent chiefly the covert instinctual capacities of the human brain. Having emerged and been refined during random evolutionary events on this planet, these neural capacities need not evoke a supernatural explanation nor represent some kind of "Cosmic Unconscious" state.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 243.

Suzuki presents his own translation. Its two exclamation marks signify his points of emphasis:

The old pond, ah!
A frog jumps in:
the water's sound!³⁵

He explains that Bashō added later the phrase that would describe the setting in his first line. By adding this phrase, “the old pond,” Bashō was able to complete the requisite seventeen Japanese syllables for this haiku.

In 1991, Makoto Ueda imagined that the last two lines of Bashō's poem were the result of an “indescribable sentiment” that had “floated into his mind.” He placed Bashō at this ineffable moment at his riverside hut in the north of Edo that spring of 1686.³⁶ He indicated that a student was then by Bashō's side. This student, Takarai Kikaku (1661–1707), had suggested that “the mountain roses” might be a good first line. Instead, Bashō preferred the much more appropriate phrase, “the old pond.”³⁷

By now, readers will recognize how many details are ambiguous. Did this frog-water sound enter from some remote experience in Bashō's distant past, perhaps at some other pond? Or did it represent some relatively more recent experience, perhaps even at the nearby Sumida River? We might also be wondering why Bashō would have uttered the strange words “rain” and “moss,” let alone “hear the sound,” in this undated dialogue with his teacher. Was this in reference to some earlier incident(s) they both knew about? Or was it related to the recent, overnight rain they had both just shared?

In this century, a well-known haiku poet, Jane Reichhold, collected 1012 of Bashō's haiku in one publication, organized successively based on the date they were composed. The “old pond” haiku enters only as number 152 in this extensive series.³⁸ Therefore, the vast majority of Bashō's haiku still remained to be written. In Japanese:

furu ike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto

In her spare translation:

³⁵ Suzuki 1973, p. 238.

³⁶ Ueda 1991, pp. 138, 140–42.

³⁷ Reichhold 2008, p. 262.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 59. She dates this haiku to the spring of 1681 or 1682.

Old pond
a frog jumps in
the sound of water³⁹

Reichhold identified thirty-three different techniques that Bashō used in his many haiku, and presents examples of each. In the eighteenth technique, we realize why Bashō’s last two lines contain a word image that could require us to make a perceptual shift. Now we understand what these words could mean in the original Japanese.⁴⁰ They could suggest that the frog jumps into the sound of water.

So, does this frog’s plunge into water capture the witness’s vision in those same milliseconds that its “plop!” also captures hearing? If so, then perhaps these two sets of incoming sensory signals are mutually reinforcing triggers for some neural events starting as low as in the colliculi of the midbrain.⁴¹ The resulting phenomena might coalesce in the lived experience of a poet-witness, a person who later could only allude to those deep shifts into other percepts that had also suddenly become egoless. These other shifts, having the capacity to efface the Self, and to dissolve both the psychic and somatic boundaries between this Self and the outside world, could enable the witness’s spared allo-resonating perceptions to expand into a vast field of undifferentiated oneness.⁴²

We welcome any new factual evidence forthcoming from Japan. If new facts could confirm that such a selfless, timeless, fearless coherent state had actually opened up in Bashō’s consciousness (sometime, somewhere), then they would support the proposals advanced earlier by authorities like Hakuin, Suzuki, and Aitken. Yet, Bashō’s cryptic words have aroused our curiosity. When, where, and why could any such “rain” and “moss” have entered into his response to Butchō’s question?

Bashō’s Ongoing Quests: A Traveler on Both an Interior and Exterior Journey

In this detective work, our own quest could certainly be called a “cold case.” However, Bashō’s travel journals disclose countless items of information

³⁹ Reichhold 2008, p. 59.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 402.

⁴¹ Austin 1998, pp. 241–42.

⁴² Bolongini 2013; Parkinson 2014. A new region representing our normal self-referent sense of personal “turf” has been identified on the right side, nearer the angular gyrus than the adjacent posterior superior temporal gyrus.

that help us understand him as a poet and as a person. So, it will help us to travel along with Bashō on these journeys. Let us choose, only for comparison, a later incident in 1689 (table 1). Bashō described it in his account of the long journey through the northern provinces.⁴³

North of Nasu, where he found the moss “dripping” at the higher wet elevations, Bashō searches for a special site. Why was it special? Because he knew that this place, in the past, had served as a hermitage for his teacher. Butchō had chosen to live here when he went off on an earlier solitary retreat in the mountains. Moreover, after Butchō had returned from this retreat, he had then described his experiences there to Bashō (at an unspecified number of times and places during the subsequent years).

Located up the hill from the temple Unganji, this special place was only “a tiny hut atop a boulder and built into a cave.”⁴⁴ There, on the surface of a nearby rock, Butchō had once used a stick of pine charcoal to inscribe this poem. Its words would long since have been weathered away:

A grass-thatched hut
less than five feet square:
regrettable indeed
to build even this—
if only there were no rains⁴⁵

This was a crude, make-shift, hut-cave. Indeed, it was a site so primitive that when it was Bashō’s turn to leave his own impermanent verse on its pillar in 1689, he included a telling avian point of reference: “Even woodpeckers don’t damage this hut.” We discover how easily each of these two Zen practitioners could infuse resonances of meaning into their verses about daily life events.

Bashō’s whole entry about this hermitage in his journal throws wide open some new windows for fresh interpretation. Its cluster of intriguing items points toward key dates in the earlier close relationship between the two men. Knowing these shared dates could help us clarify otherwise ambiguous details in the stories and haiku discussed in this and the next parts. For example, why did the conversations between these two Zen friends, teacher and student, include wet, rainy, mossy conditions? Now they also involve impermanent lines of verse, left by transient human beings, verses that would inevitably be worn away by rain, wind, and regrowing moss.

⁴³ Hamill 1999, p. xxx; Barnhill 2005, p. 53.

⁴⁴ Barnhill 2005, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Among the new possibilities now are that: (1) Bashō, the Zen student, might have been presenting his teacher with metaphors from private conversations that they had shared about this hermitage in the past. (2) Bashō might have been using words, like “hear the sound of the frog entering water,” as his allusive presentation in response to Butchō’s second question. In the time-tested intimacy of such a dyadic relationship, a few select cues in a Zen student’s response, when reinforced by corresponding body language, suffice to deliver the requisite analogy in cryptic form. And, (3) Bashō might have been alluding (in Suzuki’s story about the exchange with Butchō) to another special site that we know they shared at the same time. We’re now coming to a crucial episode back in the rainy fall of 1687. This was when the two men were together at Kashima. Barnhill indicates that a growth of “dew-wet moss” also covers the sacred foundation stone there at its nearby Shinto shrine.⁴⁶ We take up this key episode in Part II.

To Summarize

Yes, something major happened after Bashō heard the distinctive frog-water sound. When and where did this incident first occur? We need more facts. An iconic haiku was the indirect effect of this sound. The sound and its haiku keep echoing throughout the whole wide world of literature. However, the historical evidence currently available in English, and assembled above, still seems circumstantial, hearsay, and open to alternative interpretations. For example, we cannot conclude, beyond doubt, that just one special “plop!” was the only trigger that could directly have caused Bashō to drop into his one and only enlightened state of consciousness, an isolated state which in itself would have been the sole cause of him maturing during his forties.

Which other events, after the spring of 1686, could have significantly influenced Bashō and his haiku? In Part II, our quest leads us again to select certain narrative incidents from Bashō’s journals. They will be supplemented by a few selections from the next 860 haiku that he would write in those eight short years before he died in 1694. These examples provide overt contrasts. They allow each reader to decide whether any given event, at a particular time and place, appears to be of either major, minor, or negligible import.

Then, in Part III, the plan will be to document a recurrent avian theme. It is a topic that would increasingly attract Bashō’s attention and enter into his later haiku.

⁴⁶ Barnhill 2005, p. 150, n. 12.

PART II: BASHŌ'S STATES OF CONSCIOUSNESS

The senses, particularly sight and hearing, provide the most basic link between the outside world and the activities of the mind.⁴⁷

Harada Shōdō Rōshi

The poet's voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.⁴⁸

William Faulkner (1897–1962)

Did Bashō efface the Self during one or more later states of consciousness? If he did, how was this expressed in his later poetry and in his other behavior?

Aitken's analysis suggested that Bashō's successive haiku manifested a developing maturity during the eight years before he died. This maturity mirrored his own development as a person.⁴⁹ Indeed, based only on his readings of these haiku, Bashō's verses appeared to Aitken to "point precisely" to "metaphors of nature and culture as personal experience."⁵⁰ Hamill's and Reichhold's reviews agree that Bashō showed increasing evidence of *wabi*, *sabi*, and *aware* in keeping with this deepening of personal and literary maturity during his later forties.⁵¹

Could one early episode in this evolution toward maturity have occurred in the fall of 1686, not in the spring? Ueda dates this potential incident to October 2, 1686.⁵² On this evening, Bashō and a few of his students were enjoying a moon-viewing party at his hut north of Edo. There, at a pond, Bashō became impressed by viewing the full moon, and then composed the following haiku:

meigetsu ya
ike wo megurite
yo mo sugara

⁴⁷ Storandt 2000, p. 56.

⁴⁸ Miller 1976, p. 3. This is the closing sentence of Faulkner's Nobel Prize acceptance speech in 1950. It was a time when the Cold War posed the threat of atomic catastrophe.

⁴⁹ Aitken 2003, p. 34.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

⁵¹ Hamill 1999, p. xxx; Reichhold 2008, pp. 157–59, 189, 191.

⁵² Ueda 1991, p. 143.

In translation:

The autumn moon!
I walked around the pond
all night long⁵³

Yes, it would be unusual behavior if a person actually did stay awake during an entire night while circling a pond repeatedly. Aitken suggests the possibility that when “Bashō wandered about the pond in the moonlight” an awesome awakening might have opened into a state of “suchness and emptiness of all beings and all things.” We don’t know how “long” this actual walking lasted. Its duration could have been exaggerated. Again it is uncertain which pond was involved in this incident. In Reichhold’s translation:

Full moon
walking around the pond
all night⁵⁴

She observes that its wording permits the haiku also to be read as consistent with a very different idea—that the moon “walks” around the pond during the night. She presents this same ambiguity as an example of Bashō’s twenty-sixth haiku technique. By “hiding the [human] author,” the poet is allowing nature to express itself. This haiku can serve as another illustration of Bashō’s personal trend toward allo-perception and away from ego-perception. Oseko suggests that the episode can be interpreted to mean that the poet is unaware of the lapse of time.⁵⁵

An Illuminating Event in the Next Summer, 1687

Earlier in 1687, Bashō begins to write of skylarks singing, but first he writes a haiku about lightning. He sends it off to his bright, talented disciple, Rika, who lives in Edo. Rika is special. He is the one who gave Bashō the banana tree that would become his pen name.

Representative translations of this 1687 haiku, by Barnhill and Reichhold respectively, take the following forms:

⁵³ Aitken 2003, pp. 32–33.

⁵⁴ Reichhold 2008, pp. 90, 252, 405.

⁵⁵ Oseko 1990, p. 44. This is not a haiku that manifests eternity.

Lightning
clenched in his hand:
torchlight in the dark⁵⁶

A flash of lightning
your hand takes in darkness
a paper candle⁵⁷

Could such a terse verse be an oblique hint to Rika, reminding him that a particular Zen story in the *Blue Cliff Record* conveys personal implications? This familiar story narrates the major nighttime transformation of a bright, scholarly, contentious monk who lived back in the Tang Dynasty. In Chinese, his name is Deshan Xuanjian (780 or 782–865). In Japanese, his name is Tokusan Sengan.

Young Deshan became memorable for two major reasons.⁵⁸ First, to his surprise, Chan Master Longtan Chongxin suddenly blew out the lighted paper torch that had previously enabled them to see in the darkness. This was a turning point, a big, unexpected sensory change. It was a visual trigger so striking that it abruptly precipitated Deshan into satori. Second, Deshan burned all his earlier opinionated scholarly commentaries on the *Diamond Sutra* the next day. Why? Because now—having just been transformed in the depths of satori the night before—he had realized that all his earlier writings were inconsequential.

A lightning-strike is one ancient metaphor for the flash of prajna's insight-wisdom. The flash of lightning carries an implication that life itself is also transitory. Life would also seem to have been transitory for Bashō, for he had only a few years left to live.

On balance, it is the next happenings, starting later in the fall of 1687, that appear increasingly relevant to Bashō's affinities for Zen and to the trajectory of his personal and literary development.

Later Events at the Temple Inkyoji in Fall, 1687: The First Haiku (no. 316)

On August 14, Bashō began a journey to view another harvest moon. This trip took him into the lake country around Kashima, 110 km to the northeast of Edo. His two traveling companions were Kawai Sora (1649–1710), a young student and neighbor,⁵⁹ and Soha (d. 1512–16?), a Zen monk of the temple Teirinji who lived near Bashō's hut.⁶⁰ Unfortunately, it began to

⁵⁶ Barnhill 2004, p. 209.

⁵⁷ Reichhold 2008, pp. 95, 286–87.

⁵⁸ Foster and Shoemaker 1996, pp. 104–5; Ferguson 2000, pp. 196–200.

⁵⁹ Ueda 1991, p. 145.

⁶⁰ Oseko 1990, p. 63.

rain on the afternoon of September 21, the date they had anticipated seeing the full moon. Bashō spent that rainy night with his old friend and Zen teacher, Butchō.⁶¹ Although this rainy night graced Bashō with only fleeting glimpses of the fugitive moon, it did stimulate him to write two significant haiku. The first of these in Reichhold’s series is:

*tera ni nete
makoto-gao naru
tsukimi kana*

In translation:

Sleeping at a temple
with my true face
moon viewing⁶²

The key operational words are “*makoto gao naru*.” *Makoto* means “really,” “truly,” “authentically,” “sincerely.” *Gao* (as an unbound morpheme: *kao*) means “face.” Although “*naru*” here has the force of a linking word (copula), it can also have several other intriguing meanings. One of them is even “to resound,” the way a bell resonates when it is struck. Other meanings include: “to become,” “to grow,” and “to turn.” Therefore, individual readers, from different perspectives, might feel invited to interpret this haiku at various levels. Addiss translates this haiku as:

Staying at a temple
with my own true face
I gazed at the moon⁶³

He interprets the second line of this moon-based haiku as recalling the deep spiritual awakening that realizes one’s “original face.” The basic issue is embedded in koan number 23 of the *Wumenguan* (Gateless Gate). In this koan, the legendary sixth Chan Patriarch, Dajian Huineng (638–713) poses the key question to another monk: “What is your original face from before your parents gave you life?”

If this haiku were to point toward the immediacy of an awakening, then its translations might be further “lightened.” A first step could invoke the ancient aesthetic principle: less is more. This moment could be recast into a

⁶¹ Oseko 1990, p. 67.

⁶² Reichhold 2008, p. 97.

⁶³ Addiss 2012, p. 98.

selfless mode of non-doing by dropping all Self-referential verbiage (my, I) from the last two lines. The second line would then barely hint that this rare state, graced by the impression of authenticity, is arising from the instinctual networks of an egoless brain. No such moment is gazed at, or “owned,” by any Self inside. It is a moment of single suchness (Jp. *ichinyo*).

A further condensation could begin by translating the final “*kana*” of the third line to suggest a heightened sense of closure. Placing this exclamation mark at the end could also serve to convey that a stark internal vacancy can exist when such a long-awaited “full moon” finally does appear. So:

At the temple,
original face
in cool moonlight!

Zen literature contains multiple examples of similar extraordinary realizations. They strike in a flash, quick as lightning. Lacking every trace of the old personal Self, they reveal an arctic, empty quality to the scene as it is embraced by moonlight, in an absolute vacancy of time (achronia).⁶⁴

Reichhold concurs with the interpretation that such an image of a “true face” in Bashō’s haiku refers to “one’s original being, before emotions are added to one’s life.”⁶⁵ This cool, emotionless Zen perspective is absent if a translation were to limit *makoto* to mean only “a serious look.”⁶⁶

In brief, today’s neural implications of “original face” mean that one’s limbic networks stop infusing their excessively over-conditioned emotional burdens. Those “hot fires” of greed, hatred, and delusion are briefly extinguished, after having generated much previous suffering in oneself and other persons. This cool quality in awakening had long before entered other Asian verse, but no such hint entered this haiku in its original form.

When Bashō was at the temple Inkyoji during portions of these last two days, he was interacting with Butchō, his former Zen teacher.⁶⁷ This time would have presented opportunities for the two men to be reminded of those pivotal experiences they shared during their many years together. Such a renewal of old memories might have enabled their hours in the atmosphere of this Buddhist temple to evolve into a sensitizing setting, one that had the potential for some kind of “opening” to occur.

⁶⁴ Austin 2006, pp. 434–61. Pages 434–38 discuss the cool affective qualities of this state and the subset of poems that can be called “satori poems” (Jp. *tokinoge*).

⁶⁵ Reichhold 2008, p. 228.

⁶⁶ Oseko 1990, p. 67.

⁶⁷ Barnhill 2004, p. 216.

Yet strong cultural traditions could prohibit some poets from mentioning their own private experience with such a well-known koan from the *Wumen-guan*. This koan (case 23) is noteworthy for its multiple allusions. They hint at an alert state of selfless insight, a state emptied not only of every word-thought, but also of all polarized emotions and all dimensions of time. Indeed, many Zen students who have wrestled with the surface words of this opaque koan would never think of “breaking ranks” by referring to some of its layered implications, unless compelling reasons existed for doing so.⁶⁸

Question: Was it an impropriety for Bashō to use words that might leave the impression he had actually experienced an advanced state comparable with a “true (original) face?” Not necessarily. Variations of the phrase “original face” (Jp. *honrai no menmoku*) are not uncommon in Zen dialogue. To mention these words does not necessarily imply that the trainee was now working with this particular koan at the present time, or had been in the past.

Besides, another fact of historical interest could tilt Bashō toward taking a waiver on such cultural taboos. He greatly admired the poetry and the traveling life style of Saigyō Hōshi (1118–1190), a Shingon Buddhist monk. In Saigyō’s era it was customary for Japanese monks and the Buddhist laity to engage in the formal meditation practice of moon gazing (Jp. *tsukimi*). In fact, five centuries earlier, Saigyō had also broken ranks. He had inserted the word *satori* into one of his own longer poems. Its verses can be translated as:

In the deep mountains
dwelling in the moon
of the heart-mind
in this mirror I see
satori in every direction⁶⁹

Ample evidence exists that Bashō was also attuned to the innermost feelings that he discovered during deep mindful introspection. During the following summer of 1688, he would see another full moon at the seacoast. That moon did not resonate with those additional deep feeling tones he had experienced when he glimpsed the moon at the temple back in that previous fall during the Kashima trip. Internally, he was sensitive to the big emotional difference in his mood during that remarkable fall moon of 1687 in contrast to the effect of the ordinary moon at the seacoast in 1688.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Austin 1998, pp. 536–44 (pp. 540–42 specifically address case 23).

⁶⁹ Addiss 2012, p. 38.

⁷⁰ Barnhill 2004, p. 290; Aitken 2003, p. 30.

The foregoing lines of direct and circumstantial evidence converge on several potential options. At this Buddhist temple, on that rainy fall night of September 21–22, 1687, Bashō might have dropped into a major alternate state of consciousness. Yet in Part I, both Master Hakuin, D. T. Suzuki, and Robert Aitken suggested that a more advanced Self-effacing state had been triggered by the frog-water sound a year or so earlier, back at least in the spring of 1686. Therefore, what other facts add weight to this later rain-moon incident at the temple in the fall of 1687? And, if we were to suppose that Bashō had undergone two such “opening” experiences in separate years, could that rainy fall night in the Buddhist temple have been the more decisive one, a final straw, as it were? Or was it of only relatively lesser significance? Clues exist.

Wet Leaves and Raindrops at Inkyoji in Fall, 1687: The Second Haiku
(no. 317)

That same rainy night in the temple led Bashō to compose a second haiku:

A quick glimpse of the moon—
while leaves in the tree tops
hold the rain⁷¹

Two important details are included in this second haiku: (1) Now Bashō is gazing upward, up toward the tops of trees; and (2) Out there, when the rain stops, he sees this striking visual image: moonlight glistening off the foliage of wet tree leaves.

Haiku no. 317 is significant for another reason. Its timing corresponds with another noteworthy entry in Bashō’s daily journal. This description is found in *The Record of a Journey to Kashima*. In Reichhold’s translation: “In the light of the moon, the sound of the raindrops was deeply moving; our breasts were full, but no words could express it.”⁷²

Notably, this entry from Bashō’s journal in the fall of 1687 adds three more supporting details to the first two on the list above: (1) Two kinds of stimuli are converging. These stimuli are both visible (moonlight) and audible (the sounds of falling raindrops). This combination of sight and hearing is potentially triggering, a point alluded to by Harada Rōshi in the epigraph; (2) Bashō is infused by a “deeply moving” affirmative experience; and, (3) This experience is also ineffable (indescribable).

⁷¹ Addiss 2012, p. 98.

⁷² Reichhold 2008, p. 228.

On the other hand, Barnhill’s translation uses the word “absorbed,” introducing absorption as an alternative concept. His translation of Bashō’s entry reads: “For a while, I felt peace and purity sweep over my heart . . . [In] the moon’s light and the sound of rain: I became absorbed in the deeply moving scene, beyond what any words can tell.”⁷³

Barnhill’s translation at this point then adds another entry from Bashō’s journal. It indicates that Bashō identified with the disappointment of the woman who had returned home distressed because she had not succeeded in writing an authentic poem about a cuckoo. Disappointment is not an impression that is part of the usual afterglow of *kenshō*. A more likely origin for a sense of disappointment would arise if, after having emerged from a state of absorption, the person recognized that this state was not one that had deepened further into the direct experience of *kenshō*.

Parenthetically, D. T. Suzuki, in the context of haiku, does mention the haiku poet Chio (1703–1775).⁷⁴ Only after many attempts was she finally graced with a genuine haiku about a cuckoo. This haiku, devoid of egotism and artifice, had issued from her subconscious. Suzuki wisely observes that this is the deep realm “where artistic impulses are securely kept away from our superficial utilitarian life. Zen also lives here, and this is where Zen is of great help to artists of all kinds.” Clearly more than one female haiku poet struggled to write about the cuckoo because this Chio lived in the century after Bashō.

Full Moonlight Glistening off Wet Tree Leaves

Some night, after the rain stops, go out and look up into what occurs when wet foliage is backlit by a full moon. Examine the effects created: (1) When that familiar bright moonlight enters only through an area of clear sky; as compared with (2) When this same full moonlight shatters as it glistens off hundreds of wet leaves interposed up in the treetops. If you’re fortunate, you’ll now be seeing something rare—hundreds of tiny bright points of reflected light set against their darker, arboreal background. The novelty of such a sight could have captured Bashō’s attention.

⁷³ Barnhill 2005, pp. 24–25. This journal entry indicates that Butchō also wrote a poem about that night which speaks to an old Chan theme: the never-changing light in the sky (our original Buddha nature). It is only the intervening clouds (our delusions) that prevent us from perceiving this ongoing light.

⁷⁴ Suzuki 1973, pp. 224–26.

The Sound of Raindrops

Anyone can hear the familiar pattering or drumming of rain. Anyone can hear the “plop!” or “ker-plunk!” of a frog. These mundane sounds might seem hardly worth mentioning. Unless, of course, these natural sound energies strike a sensitized person. Suppose that person’s hearing and feelings have become keenly aware, that their psychic and somatic senses of Self happen to be on the brink of dropping off. Now, simple sound stimuli could trigger the abrupt shift that breaks open into an alternate state of consciousness.

Amid the drumming of raindrops, and then the awesome embrace of moonlight, can even poets easily access words to describe a chest full of emotion? No. Deeper alternate state experiences drop into otherworldly domains. They resonate beyond the reach of language and feel inexpressible to any witness. States of *kenshō* arise from networks much farther beyond wordy attachments than do states of absorption. Moreover, a person’s spontaneous act of gazing up and out there—into the distance—can also set in motion deep shifting mechanisms.⁷⁵ These shifts enhance allo-centric (Other-referential) attentive processing. And, at the same instant, they also drop off one’s prior Self-centered frames of reference.

Raindrops on a tile roof are not trivial sounds. Notice how a hard rain directs your auditory attention way up there, above, to the sounds impacting overhead. With regard to the triggering potential that raindrops have, Harada Rōshi points to their role as potent stimuli that can deeply transform a person’s consciousness.⁷⁶ In the context of the forty-sixth case of *The Blue Cliff Record*, he observes, “When we hold on to nothing, we become the sound of the raindrops [Jp. *uteki sei*]. The raindrops become us . . . Unless we realize this sound of rain that fills the heavens and the earth, we will never know true joy.” Notice what these words imply: (1) No personalized attachments; (2) No former Self/Other boundary; and, (3) Self-Other co-identity.

Did Bashō experience such a state of awakening that rainy night at the temple? Is it possible that the conversation between Bashō and Butchō reported by Suzuki but left undated actually took place there in late September 1687? Clearly, we have just begun this quest of literary detective work. However, Bashō’s travel journals have now hinted that he was attentive to woodpecker behavior and to skylarks. Were other birds mentioned increasingly in his haiku? Bashō’s avian Zen theme has yet to be fully appreciated, and its implications are developed in Part III.

⁷⁵ Austin 2011, pp. 20–37, 72–91.

⁷⁶ Storandt 2011, pp. 74–75. Harada Rōshi suggests that the two men spoke at Bashō’s hut in May (ibid., p. 51).

PART III: ZEN AND THE DAILY-LIFE INCREMENTAL TRAINING OF BASHŌ’S ATTENTION

Keep your mind clear like space, but let it function like the tip of a needle.⁷⁷

Seon Master Seung Sahn (1927–2004)

Tell me to what you pay attention and I will tell you who you are.

Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955)

By at least his third decade, Bashō had become a student of Rinzai Zen. Although he never became an ordained monk, his close affinities with Zen were still evident in his clothing and tonsure. Traveling was risky in the late 1600s, and to be safer he often wore the darker robes of a monk and shaved his head.⁷⁸

We do not know how many hours he spent in regular zazen practice. On the other hand, he clearly exemplified a major emphasis of Zen training: the honing of keen attentional and intuitive skills during daily-life practice (Jp. *shugyō*). These skills are on display as entries in Bashō’s five travel journals and many hundreds of his haiku. The whole collection serves to document the remarkable content and scope of his informal training in the art of remaining acutely alert and aware, indoors and outdoors. Master Seung Sahn’s epigraph points to the essence of these twin attentive functions. Clearly, Bashō was a mindful observer, exercising both the requisite divergent and convergent creative problem-solving skills.

Birds play a special role in this regard.⁷⁹ The sightings and songs of birds provide excellent natural opportunities for training one’s explicit powers of hearing and seeing. The data condensed in table 1 offer a novel way for a biographer to evaluate both the literary, audio-visual, and implicit psychological consequences of this “avian presence.”

⁷⁷ Sahn 1997, p. 234.

⁷⁸ Reichhold 2008, p. 9. Two paintings portray Bashō as he appeared to his contemporary artist-disciples. One is by Kyōriku (see Shirane 1998, p. 214). The other is by Ogawa Haritsu (see the frontispiece in Ueda 1991). Bashō’s own haiku-painting (Jp. *haiga*) illustrates both his banana/plantain plant and his closed gate (see the full-color plate in Addiss 2012, pp. 114–15).

⁷⁹ Austin 2013a, 2013b.

TABLE 1. BIRD CITATIONS IN BASHŌ'S HAIKU

PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT	EARLY PERIOD	A PROFESSIONAL POET	RETREATING TO NATURE; A SPIRITUAL LIFE	A POET ON JOURNEYS	A 1500-MILE JOURNEY TO THE NORTH	AT HIS PEAK, STILL TRAVELING	MATURING IN LIFE & IN POETRY
INTERVAL [TOTAL YEARS]	1662–1674 [13]	1675–1679 [5]	1680–1683 [4]	1684–1688 [5]	1689 [1]	1690–1691 [2]	1692–1694 [3]
TOTAL HAIKU DURING EACH INTERVAL	53	60	73	304	138	147	237
INDIVIDUAL HAIKU NUMBERS (REICHHOLD'S SEQUENCES)	nos. 1–53	nos. 54–113	nos. 114–186	nos. 187–490	nos. 491–628	nos. 629–775	nos. 776–1012
NUMBER OF BIRD CITATIONS % in bold	2	2	10 (13.7%)	90 (9.9%)	9 (6.5%)	21 (14.3%)	16 (6.8%)
PARTICULAR INCL- DENTS OF NOTE		Studying Zen with Butchō sometime between 1673* and 1684.		“Old pond...” in the spring of 1686.	“The voice of a dove pierces my body.”		Bush warbler!
		Takes his new pen name in 1681 from the plantain/banana tree, a gift from Rika.		Temple, rain-drops, “original face” in the fall of 1687	(Summer of 1689, at Ogaki)		Water rail (2 times)
Skylark ** citations				2, Summer of 1687 1, Summer of 1688	1, Spring/ Summer 1689	1, Summer of 1691	

* Reichhold dates to 1681 his starting to study Zen with Butchō (2008, p. 409). Barnhill's date is 1682 (2005, p. 157).

** Hibiari (*Alauda arvensis*) is a bird famous for the high-soaring male's melodious courting song.

The table’s columns provide a semi-quantitative estimate of how birds influenced Bashō’s attentiveness in each of seven intervals during the last thirty three years of his life. Birds not only flew into his journals, they landed easily on many lines of his haiku.

No such longitudinal textual analysis could have been possible without referring to the 1012 haiku and supporting details documented throughout Reichhold’s excellent book. The table illustrates seven key points condensed from its pages:

- Bashō started to write haiku when he was eighteen. During the next eighteen years—from 1662 through 1679—his 113 haiku cited birds only four times (three cuckoo, one gull). Obviously, during his first thirty five years, Bashō was not “a bird person.”
- Soon, birds became “significant others.” Notice that a major change took place during the next four years. It was sometime during this interval that he began his Rinzaï Zen studies with Butchō. Then, from 1680 through 1683, he cited birds ten times in seventy-three haiku.
- During the next five years—from 1684 through 1688—Bashō cited birds thirty times in 304 haiku. Clearly, people who travel as he did, on foot outdoors, are more likely to see and hear more birds. We’re interested in the cumulative effect that all these avian exposures would have on nurturing and honing his attentive skills. Global and focal attention play a crucial role, poised at the foremost tip of all our subsequent mental processing. So now, the central question becomes this: as each fresh event captures a traveling poet’s attention, how do these repeated moments keep reshaping the plasticity of his brain, sensitizing his consciousness, enriching and expanding his literary repertoire?
- Direct and indirect answers to this question require more conclusive facts than are now available. The first two parts of this paper have referred to three major stories. For example, one “story” in Part I needs the actual dates and places of the incidents relating to the “old pond” haiku in the spring of 1686. Having more details about a second story there could help motivate a search for further clues about “rain” and “moss” in the dialogues that Bashō and Butchō shared at different times over the years.

The above factual evidence would clarify the raindrops/“original face” event in the Buddhist temple during September 1687, mentioned in Part II. Events that night obviously made a deep impression on Bashō, and prompted two haiku.

- A much more subtle index of potential answers might begin with the advent of a very special high-flying bird, *Alauda arvensis*, the Eurasian skylark. Not until the summers of 1687 and 1688 did Bashō begin to cite skylarks. The songs and flights of male skylarks are extraordinary. It was the skylark's song that motivated Vaughn Williams and Hoagy Carmichael to compose memorable musical scores.⁸⁰ If you hope to see this aptly-named bird high aloft, you'll need to be able to look up and out into the distance. This means you'll be extending your neck, tilting your head way back, then gazing far up to focus your search on a faint speck far out in the distant sky.
- Bashō was alert to the fact that, for him, a bird song was a direct, penetrating, lived experience. For example, in 1689 he wrote, "the voice of a dove pierces my body." In that same year, he used the cutting word *ya* in haiku no. 509. This emphasized the distinctive, piercing archaic call of the crane. Only during his last three years were the unique liquid warbling notes of the bush warblers (*uguisu*) also emphasized by *ya* (!). Only then was the special rap of the water rail described as "door-knocking." These bird songs have an impact. They are being felt, not just heard.
- Bashō's haiku during his last five years cited the cuckoo twenty-three times. It was his all-time favorite. D. T. Suzuki comments on one reason why the cuckoo is a favorite of Japanese haiku poets: it sings in flight. Even though you may hear its song at night, you can't see the source.⁸¹ Among Bashō's second tier of all-time favorites, the next five birds also voiced prominent calls. This group included cranes (seven times), sparrows (six times), *uguisu* or nightingales (five times), plovers (four times), and pheasants (three times). No other non-human creatures, airborne or ground-dwelling, attracted so much repeated attention in Bashō's haiku as did birds. This need not come as a surprise. In the instantaneity of direct experience, bird sightings and songs tap instinctual levels, reminding us subconsciously how deep are our roots in the natural world.

Lightness in Bashō's Haiku and Its Relation to Zen

In Zen, enlightenment implies a "lightening up" of old rigid attitudes and behaviors. Not until you briefly let go of all that heaviness which had preoc-

⁸⁰ It is possible to hear recordings of the skylark's song and Williams's tone poem entitled "The Lark Ascending" on the Internet.

⁸¹ Suzuki 1973, p. 224.

cupied your mind and body can you deeply realize what it means to really lighten up.

In his final years from 1690 to 1694, Bashō employed one particular term to characterize his poetic technique. He called this theme “lightness” (Jp. *karumi*).⁸² He also applied this word to literature in general. *Karumi* meant a style of writing that was simplified, uncontrived, effortless. Returning to Blyth’s literary formulation back in Part I, this theme of lightness would imply that the “doer” now performs any work with a “light touch.” Because the “deed” is done with no clinging attachments, there exists no Self-conscious sense of accomplishment. Each event seems to happen by itself out in the whole wide world. Free from the heavy burden of intrusive personal emotions, the liberated writer’s perspective is more objective and flexible. For Bashō, it was when he was outdoors that nature’s fresh stimuli became meaningful “sensations” which often culminated in his haiku.⁸³

Karumi is an elastic word (like *samadhi*, earlier, or *wu wei*). Its lightness can have sensori-motor associations that feel internalized or externalized. It can also have shallower (somatic), or deeper (psychic) resonances. For example, after a state of internal absorption, the effort-free, brisk lightness of movement can flow spontaneously for many hours. Embodied in this same sense of immediacy is a distinctive feeling of actual physical lightness.⁸⁴ Had Bashō recognized *karumi* as a term because he had also “been there”?

Alternatively, the impression in *kenshō* is of being released from the heavy burden imposed by every last psychic form of bondage.⁸⁵ This lightness is experienced in the depths of the psyche. Consciousness will finally arrive at its innate clarity, its freedom and competence, only when it has also dropped off all of its former over-conditioned longings, loathings, and existential delusions.

When these several dynamic states of lightness impact directly, they make a deep impression on one’s state of consciousness. It is tempting to consider that Bashō so emphasized *karumi* after he had appreciated similar qualities emerging in himself, qualities with which he could then identify with consciously. However, those sharp distinctions drawn above between the states of absorption and *kenshō* were made for preliminary purposes of discussion. These differences become less obvious when we can read about them only at a third-person level, when all the old facts are not yet in, and when the few words available to examine are only in an English translation.

⁸² Reichhold 2008, pp. 188–91; Addis 2012, p. 119.

⁸³ Austin 1998, pp. 664–67.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 508–10.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 536–39.

Can One or More Deep States of Awakening Enhance the Maturation of Affirmative Behavioral Traits?

In the course of “growing up,” many normal adults also let go of their over-emotionalized burdens. They “lighten up,” and undergo beneficial “passages” to a saner lifestyle. The term “passages” has been used to refer to these normal, ordinary psychophysiological transitions toward maturity that unfold over the years.⁸⁶ Could relatively simple measures—those that cultivate one’s focal and global attentiveness—exert a favorable incremental influence on the normal plasticity of the brain, further reinforcing one’s inherent developmental patterns of psychological maturity? It depends.

Lesser epiphanies enable us to pause in natural outdoor settings. However, occasional minor quickenings are not central to the deeper issue now being examined. A large survey of mystical experiences in the general population showed that when such brief pauses were limited to aesthetic responses per se, they did not cause a substantial enduring change in the person’s subsequent religious orientations or interpersonal relationships.⁸⁷ Then, which people were transformed the most? These were individuals in a different category. They had undergone repeated experiences of various kinds, both aesthetic and religious. In the case of Bashō the poet, these pages suggest that in his later life he experienced a variety of large and small openings in his consciousness. Collectively, they become a plausible explanation for why Bashō and his haiku could continue to show substantial maturation during his later forties.

Another significant research report was based on a longitudinal study of thirty-one male and female monastic trainees in the Sōtō Zen tradition.⁸⁸ Seven of these trainees had experienced the extraordinary state of *kenshō* during their five-year period of residence. Serial psychological evaluations suggested that these brief states of awakening could have enabled them to mature more rapidly than did their cohorts, and to have become more integrated and better-adjusted individuals.

Nielson and Kaszniak studied sixteen meditators who represented different Buddhist traditions.⁸⁹ When these subjects had followed a regular meditative practice for more than ten years they appeared less attached to their physical symptoms. They also reported greater degrees of “emotional clarity.” This important capacity for clarity was defined as “the ability to accu-

⁸⁶ Austin 2009, pp. 221–48; Austin 2014, pp. 20–21, 91–92, 97–151, 223–24.

⁸⁷ Bourque and Back 1971. This survey was based on 1,553 interviews.

⁸⁸ MacPhillamy 1986.

⁸⁹ Nielson and Kaszniak 2006, pp. 392–405.

rately discriminate among, and label, one’s feeling states.”⁹⁰ Their greater degrees of emotional clarity correlated with both lower arousal ratings and lower skin conductance responses. These meditators were also more skillful in discerning which emotional valence was present even when it was hidden inside a masked picture taken from the International Affective Picture System. Good poets might become even better poets if they cultivate these qualities of discernment.

The Final Days: Fall 1694

It is late September. Bashō is ailing. He will compose only a few more haiku before he dies. He wrote this one as a greeting for the hostess of a poetry party:

White chrysanthemums
looked at closely
no dust at all⁹¹

Set against the pure white mound of a chrysanthemum, even a tiny speck of dust might stand out as an imperfection. Hamill notes that such a dust mote might be Bashō’s oblique reference to another early incident in the Zen legends about Huineng.⁹² Before this monk became the sixth Zen patriarch, he pointed out that no dust could alight on and mar the surface of a mirror (or of anything else) that from the outset had no permanent, independent existence.⁹³ Multiple incidents in his daily life would remind Bashō of earlier references in the old Chinese and Japanese literature, including the old lore of Zen.

IN CONCLUSION

Bashō’s poetry and journals during his last decade illustrate a keenly informed, highly developed approach to a mindful, incremental daily-life practice. Their evidence suggests that as he began to see more deeply into the world of nature, he became aware of each of its diverse inhabitants—large, small, animate, inanimate, and especially those who were feathered. Moreover, that distinctive sound he had heard in the past—a frog plunging into water—was already becoming widely recognized as a unique sound-image. In the West, three centuries after that water-sound, do any of its

⁹⁰ Nielson and Kaszniak 2006, pp. 392–405.

⁹¹ Reichhold 2008, pp. 231, 393.

⁹² Hamill 1999, p. 176.

⁹³ Cf. Ferguson 2000, pp. 37–41.

distant ripples still play a subtle role in encouraging today's popular versions of three-line poetry?

Consider one recent example: This is a slim (1 cm), small (15 × 15 cm), booklet with only sixty pages. Yet even its succinct title, *Zen Birds*, speaks volumes. With a feather-light sense of touch, Vanessa Sorensen's wet brush skillfully portrays the tree swallow in soft watercolors.⁹⁴ Her lines of verse grace the facing page. They exemplify *karumi*, the airborne essence of this bird:

How lucky the air
to feel the graceful embrace
of the swallow's wing⁹⁵

Today, does it matter where certain details of the Bashō stories occurred, when they happened, and to whom? Yes, facts matter. Given today's immediate global networking, we are now led to expect that when any revolutionary incident occurs, it will quickly capture the world's attention and be (over-)documented with accurate factual reporting. Clearly, most events relevant to these Bashō narratives are now centuries old, beyond reach of our current expectations. Even so, this evidence hints that Bashō seemed to have undergone two substantial openings, not one, in addition to having his attention repeatedly focused on daily life events during countless present moments, soon made more vivid in his haiku.

The second of these substantial episodes dates to the rainy night and furtive moon in late September 1687. It deeply penetrated him and appears to have opened into an alternate state somewhere near either absorption or *kenshō*.⁹⁶ In either event, it did more than inspire two haiku. It also left more actual first-person journal entries in its wake, waiting for us to clarify, than did that iconic frog-water sound, the echoes from which are still going on worldwide.

Meanwhile, this remarkable man clearly accomplished much during the final eight years of his short life. He became not just a revolutionary poet in his own day, and a saint to some, but an exemplar of Zen poetic sensibilities for all time.⁹⁷ If the ambiguities pointed to in these pages are to be viewed

⁹⁴ Sorenson 2010, pp. 3–4.

⁹⁵ Swallow-embracing space! No human presence. These three lines complement the earlier words of Master Hakuin written three centuries earlier: "For all people crossing the ocean of life and death, how enviable is the flight of the swallow" (Seo and Addiss 2010, p. 152).

⁹⁶ The suggestions of these two possibilities—absorption and *kenshō*—does not exclude the possibility that the former ushered in the latter, as appropriately happened in the case of D. T. Suzuki. Cf. Austin 1998, p. 477.

⁹⁷ Addiss 2012, pp. 121–26.

correctly, they will be seen as a plea for more facts, including dates, that can inform a more coherent narrative. And if these hints motivate others to clarify what did happen in Japan, over three centuries ago, then they will have served their intended purpose.

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