

a collection of clouds

Zen haiku and other poetry

debra jan bibel

Elie Metchnikoff Memorial Library



a collection of clouds. Zen haiku and other poetry

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FIRST EDITION

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To the memory of Baruch and Bassya



Books by Debra Jan Bibel

Milestones in Immunology. A historical exploration

*Freeing the Goose in the Bottle. Discovering Zen through science,
understanding science through Zen*

a collection of clouds. Zen haiku and other poems



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Preface

An eon ago, at the wise old age of 22 just before entering graduate school to earn my doctorate in medical microbiology and immunology, I imagined myself fulfilling the standard progression of academic scientists: a vigorous period of laboratory experimentation leading to some noteworthy discoveries, a rise up the academic ladder furthered by a bevy of supporting graduate students, a quieter interval of philosophical or historical dabbling, and retirement as an honored educator. I would have a loving mate and two clever, respectful children, a comfortable house, and a secure moderate income. It was my version of the Great American Dream.

Needless to say, life does not develop on such a flimsy foundation. The details of the aberrations need not be mentioned, but by-and-large I did produce a few modest ripples in the pool of scientific knowledge. Although not obtaining a professorship, I worked for several periods in a medical school as a basic science and clinical investigator, and now hold unsalaried faculty rank. My interest in the history of science came earlier in my career than anticipated; I fell victim of bibliomania. The growing collection of books, articles, and photographs on the history of my discipline led to the founding—purely in jest—of the Elie Metchnikoff Memorial Library. It soon became a regional resource. I also began and continue to write columns on the history and philosophy of microbiology and immunology for a local professional society.

Meanwhile, like many of my generation, I have engaged in personal noetic exploration. It began long before delving into sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll as an adult academic hippie, and continues today in informal studies of consciousness. The University of California at Berkeley did not have a undergraduate requirement for a minor curriculum to accompany a major, but, looking back, my selection of courses in the humanities would have comprised



one in comparative religion. The spiritual seed planted in 1964 with a de facto course on Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, and which germinated and grew during the American cultural revolution, eventually blossomed in 1981 when I encountered Seung Sahn, a Korean Zen master. I took to his school of Zen immediately. A seven-week pilgrimage to the monasteries of Japan, Korea, and Nepal anchored me in Buddhism. (Having been born, raised, and educated in the Pacific-facing San Francisco Bay Area with many Asian friends and acquaintances, I suppose that I was exceedingly well primed.) Later, I avidly studied the haiku of both old and modern masters to develop a unique, nontraditional style as part of my multifaceted Zen practice. This book is the fruit of an old tree. Perhaps my writings will serve as a dharma seed in the reader, and so continue the cycle.



Almost unwittingly I am surfing a familial karmic wave. (These may seem strange words from a scientist, but I find reductionistic genetic explanations of heredity, even when coupled with broad-stroked environmental behaviorism, to be lacking. Life is far more complex.) My great-grandfather was a rabbi, but his son, although undergoing scholarly religious training and receiving ordination, refused to continue in his footsteps. My grandfather Baruch [Boris] Bibel (his name literally means blessed book) could not accept the God of the Torah! He instead became a woodworker, and made a lifetime study of the pantheistic nature philosophy of a distant relative and namesake, Baruch Spinoza. This book, too, is an echo. Charmed by things Japanese and influenced by an anthology of poorly translated haiku, my mother Bassya (“daughter-of-God”) composed and published between 1969 and 1977 four books of numerous short poems in Western style. As for my father—ethicist, cultural historian, and storyteller? My nephew, a news anchor and journalist in radio, seems to be *his* harmonic.



Acknowledgments

Sydna Armstrong is more than my student in haiku and Zen Buddhist dharma; she is a wonderful friend. On numerous occasions she has ably advised me in improving certain of my poetry. She has my thanks for her suggestions as well as her support and camaraderie. I particularly appreciate her kind Foreword to this book. Michael Welch, haiku publisher and critic, provided helpful advice in reviewing some samples of my work. Although he missed the point of my nontraditional perspective, his comments did spur me to reconsider and revise more than a few poems. A special appreciation goes to the Kwan Um School of Zen and its founder, Seung Sahn, a highly esteemed Korean Zen master, whose personality and teachings brought me to the serious examination and practice of this unique approach to Buddhism. Without this foundation I would have never ventured into the various Zen-associated arts, including haiku poetry.

DJB



About This Edition

a collection of clouds has been considerably expanded and thoroughly revised from the earlier less formal booklets that I have distributed from time to time among friends and relatives. This publication should be regarded as definitive.

The limited first printing consists of 60 copies.



Foreword

Sydna Armstrong

“What’s this?” she suddenly asked, as she whipped a pen from her purse and held it under my nose. Somewhat taken aback by the abruptness of her gesture but also by the simplicity of the question, I snapped back the obvious answer: “A pen!” “Incorrect!” she retorted. “You’re attached to words!”

This was my first encounter with Dr. Jan Bibel, and I knew that moment we were to become friends. We had been introduced by a mutual friend only half an hour earlier at the Tower classical record store in Berkeley. Her quiz occurred at the point in our conversation when I asked Jan about this Zen she practiced and if she would explain it to me.

That day I had learned that as well as being a scientist, philosopher, artist, and photographer, Jan was also a poet. Now here we were several weeks later, hunched over several sheets of her poetry on my living room couch. But as she began to read her three-line verses aloud, I hardly heard these concise lines as poetry. After all, hadn’t I been immersed in Shelley and Keats and Shakespeare these past years? Where were the metaphors? The beauty? The song? For an instant I was transported back to the record store: baffled before Jan! Yet, as she continued to read, I attempted to share more deeply in the creative process, willing to pick up the echoes implicit in her words. And as I listened, I began to see. Jan had refined her works into touchstones of suggestiveness; each poem was a recording of the essence of a moment in which she had linked nature to human nature. These lines had demanded much from Jan, and now they were demanding much from me. By nightfall she had departed, and I was aware that deep within me something had begun to rumble: an urge to learn more about these Zen haiku.

In the weeks that followed, Jan introduced me to meditation and its application to the writing of haiku. T. S. Eliot’s line

came to mind often at first: “For the most of us, there is only the unattended moment. . .the distraction fit,” and I smiled and winced simultaneously as I recognized myself as one of the “most” crowd. I was a Westerner involved in an Eastern practice that obviously wasn’t working. But then—something happened. Inadvertently I came upon a Robert Frost poem, *The Pasture*, a favorite from childhood. Frost, like Zen, was pointing to clarity of mind with all its ramifications, and grateful for the serendipity of the poem, I dedicated myself anew—to train attention and to take responsibility for it. As I did, certain ordinary objects at times assumed a strange aesthetic significance, even now, I remember the spark of these, my first “haiku moments”.

Five years have past since Jan first sat on my couch sharing her poems. She continues to critique my haiku while remaining both guide and friend. And the poems she originally read to me? I reread them often. As my understanding deepens, (again in the words of T. S. Eliot) her “hints and guesses”, her fresh insights stun me anew. These poems and the new ones she has included in this collection display her gift for synthesizing the particular and the universal, the minute and the vague, what is and what is not. They continue to inspire and remind me that wholeness can happen in the most ordinary way. Joseph Campbell once stated: “I don’t think we’re looking for the meaning of life; I think we’re looking for the experience of being alive!” Mediated through her personality, Jan’s haiku impart *her* experiences of being alive. I encourage you, the reader, to open to their message as she points the way to come to your *own* discovery of the endless source. Through her art she echoes the words of Robert Frost: “You come too.”

She would certainly join me here in sharing with you the spirit of the eighteenth-century poet, Ryokan:

Who says my poems are poems?
My poems are not poems.
When you know my poems are not poems,
Then we can speak of poetry!



Introduction

Every morning Jui-yen called out, “Master!” and replied to himself,
“Yes!”
“Always be awake!”
“Yes!” was the answer.
“Do not be deceived by others!”
“No, never!”

Which is the correct master?

Koan from the Wu-Men Kuan, the Gateless Gate

Encountered my self the other day and decided to conduct an interview. . .

Q: This small book of poetry claims to be of “Zen haiku”. Why the distinction? Is it not true that haiku is closely associated with Zen?

A: Zen haiku, for me, differs from other poetry by its being the succinct impression of an incident, mood, or essence that has been actually perceived, not merely observed, in a natural situation. Indeed, drafts of poems must be completed shortly thereafter while insights are fresh. Because these poems are more than verbal snapshots, they must convey the clear moment-to-moment mind of the witness. (For contrasting examples, this book includes a section of haiku imbued with *thought*.) The poem arises simply and spontaneously by being alert and—like a young child—finding wonder in everything and—like a wise old grandparent—grasping their proper relationships and functions. The work then becomes



transcendent. Zen haiku, hence, are not about Zen. They *are* Zen—or at least start as such—and cannot be forced, as some school exercise. For this reason, the very act of experiencing–writing Zen haiku becomes both tool and fruit of Zen practice. Although it is far more difficult, photography, another artistic approach to Zen that I frequently apply, is conducted in much the same way.

Haiku grew out of a literary and courtly game of linking verses, called *renku* or *renga*, where one poet in the party would compose a verse suggested by the preceding one. The leading verse, the *hokku*, eventually stood alone. This convivial and lighthearted origin of haiku persists in its Chinese characters, p'ai chou, which translate as “play verse” or “fun words”. The Japanese poets of *renku* and many early haiku depended on their memories and imagination. In the early evolution of haiku the poem became more serious, adopting the themes and style of *tanka*, poems of five lines that stemmed from the Taoist poetry of China. Matsuo Basho, the seventeenth-century pioneer of haiku, was also the patriarch of Zen haiku, for in addition to using his imagination, he wrote about events and perceptions that occurred in his life, particularly during his travels. He was influenced by Zen practice and the poems of Chinese Buddhist and Taoist hermits deeply submerged in nature. Haiku would have inevitably emerged around nature themes of the human condition and the environment, for Japan is culturally defined by the nature animism underlying Shinto and by Taoist-stamped Zen.

Q: The acts of masters of Zen who specialize in calligraphy, martial arts, or tea ceremonies are recognized as especially aesthetic, powerful, pure, and efficacious. Are Zen haiku, hence, of better quality than other poems composed by mere reflection and whim?

A: No, nor are they worse. The point of Zen haiku is entirely personal for the poet. The reader will respond to a well-crafted, meaningful poem whether it originated through immediate



perception or the exercise of imagination or thought. The latter method may indeed produce a poem that evokes the spirit of Zen to most readers; on the other hand, even haiku arising through Zen mind may utterly fail to communicate. I do find, however, that nature provides a greater bank of patterns. The vignettes of Zen haiku will probably be more varied and interesting.

Q: The form of haiku has been an object of contention for decades. What is your view?

A: Zen requires both discipline and wisdom; thus, the form of the poems generally must meet an arbitrary standard, yet allow exceptions when efficacy is improved. Japanese traditional haiku are of 17 phonemic characters divided into three lines in the form of 5-7-5. A phonemic character does not necessarily correspond to an English syllable. It might even indicate an interjection or punctuation. I find it futile to attempt a precise Japanese format in another language, particularly one as expansive and exacting as English. Our language has the article *the*, for instance. This said, haiku are minimally defined as brief, one-breath poems divided typically into three lines of short-long-short form. It does not matter whether they are of 10, 12, or even 18 syllables, so long as a standard has been chosen. Although I admit that it is on the long side, I elected a 5-7-5 format as target, not a rule. I feel that many, certainly not all, poems much shorter than this are too anorexic. A poem should communicate directly, if not readily. Many modern haiku poets write without any standard, providing great flexibility and freedom, but this laxity has the hazard of supporting laziness and a loss of craft. They should instead consider developing their own format. For instance, Lucien Stryk, a student of Zen and an esteemed Zen poet, refuses to cast his succinct poetry under the rubric of haiku.

On the other hand, too many restrictions can stunt creativity. One well-known example is that traditional haiku in Japan incorporates code words for season. This should not be a

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requirement since the season is integral to the experience; it is enfolded in the observation. Other aspects of structure are well recognized, such as the pivot point or pause and the balance, contrast, and rhythm of the poem. There are no rules here; it is a matter of art within the craft. I have recognized that, since translators of Japanese haiku in English usually are unable to incorporate the alliterations, onomatopoeia, double meanings, and sometime puns found in the original, Western readers have acquired a false impression that haiku is supposed to be stark and austere. Zen masters are not known to be morose; they are playful in their teaching. Harking back to their roots, haiku are open to these poetic devices as in Western traditions, and I especially enjoy discovering them as the poems are cast on the page.

The use of metaphor, simile, and anthromorphisms, however, is traditionally shunned, although I find that on occasion such descriptions are scientifically accurate. Furthermore, many demand that haiku be objective, but both Buddhist and physicist know that objectivity is a false concept and that observer and object are interdependent processes. Our language, our philosophical worldview are also fundamentally metaphoric. Therefore, although interpretations are to be avoided, perceptions and emotions, our humanity—however substantially empty they may be—are valid subjects of observation. *This insight is another sharp distinction between Zen haiku and conventional poetic haiku.* If sadness comes with an occasional gray day, then the Zennist will acknowledge it. If the Zen poet at first mistakes robins for flowers on leafless trees, then such a description is *not* a metaphor. The discovery of the fallacy becomes a revelatory psychological and Buddhist teaching!

Haiku traditionally do not include titles since the poem is complete in itself. I do here. Why? Since the days of Basho, poets have drafted their works in their journals, which provide personal context. My poetry *is* my personal journal. Commentary in the form of a title allows me to record additional information.



Q: Why did you prepare this book? Surely, there are enough examples of haiku available for any reader. Are your works special? Has not everything been said already?

A: Yes, everything has been said, perhaps a thousand times over, generation after generation, civilization after civilization. We ignore the classics and do not seem to listen to history. It is as if we cannot truly accept anything unless it is from our own time and in our particular place and culture. In our present high pressure society of accelerating technological change, sound bites, packaged time intervals, and a ceaseless deluge of images, we have little respect for oldness and have little opportunity to slowly savor a quiet, introspective moment. There is something tantalizing about the new, even if it is the *n*th translation of the Tao Te Ching or yet another recording of a Beethoven symphony.

The production of this book has been motivated out of practical, personal, and pedagogical concerns. A book has greater opportunity to reach a potential readership than a specialized journal sent to already committed subscribers. Moreover, a book is an individual statement. Poetry, like art and music, is deeply personal; nevertheless, its creator has a social need to share the insights and to be acknowledged. No, my works themselves are not special, but my work is. This book is largely to encourage attentiveness to one's surroundings and to one's self. The poetic pen and tablet should be as ubiquitous as the camera and the cellular phone. When not fully engaged in a work task—in work *samadhi*—we should be in walking meditation, keenly alert and selfless even when witnessing ourselves. Of course, with living in an urban, often high-stressed region, time away in a quiet rural environment promotes openness and fresh insights; most of my poems concern events during hiking and camping. It is a matter of contrast: a nomad, farmer, or other rustic resident might find city life as invigorating and contemplative. The Zen Buddhist path has strong elements of psychological experimentation. Beyond a creative outlet and verbal art, the single act of experiencing-writing



haiku is an introspective instrument, an exercise more potent than chanting or reading the sutras.

For the reader, a haiku is a subtle seed that meshes and develops in the mind as a perspective-altering complex. The very simplicity of the poem induces a similar decompression of our life. The chattering brain is taken aback. A haiku, like a novel or radio drama, transports the reader to a virtual place, entirely familiar, because unstated details are filled in by imagination and experience. Haiku pass directly to our heart, where they can act slowly and secretly. We learn to appreciate the fleeting, the small event, the moment among a lifetime of moments. If the reader is philosophically inclined, then the underlying essence and meaning of each poem can be analyzed. Haiku can also be self-referential. If mere words can create new worlds—dreams—how much of the normal cosmos we derive from our senses (which in Buddhist philosophy number eight—the sixth being thought) is likewise mentally constructed and conditioned, hence, empty?

There is also a religious aspect. Zennists have a psychological principle of *turning words*, an expression or even event only meaningful for the individual that, when heard, read, or witnessed during the course of an ordinary day, shatters the extreme a-conscious spiritual tension (Great Doubt), such as developed on “becoming” an assigned koan. The resulting collapse of a student’s delusional and illusional foundations of self and of reality (Great Death) opens to satori, to enlightenment. Haiku could easily have this capacity. The *Ah!* of the aesthetic haiku experience could suddenly lead to *Aha!* As Louis Pasteur argued, “Where observation is concerned, chance favors only the prepared mind.”

Q: In this dialogue, who asks the questions and who answers?

A: *a collection of clouds.*



a collection of clouds



Glimpses

[1987 - 1990]

Decaying deer corpse,
fracturing eroded rocks:
two songs of winter.

Chattering birds
herald the golden dawn.
I, too, lift my head.

Night fog pseudopods.
miss this mountain tent refuge.
Ah! Warm hands and tea.

Cloud cools the mountain—
Black butterflies motionless,
silent gray snow.

Hawk glides the sky
along hidden thermal paths,
watchfully silent.



Sierra Meditation

Three basking lizards,
frozen in afternoon sun.
One wears clothing.

Awakened! Muktak
clacks here in the forest?
Crafty woodpecker!

Meandering ant,
let me help. The path you seek
is not on my leg.

Moonless sky ablaze,
ten thousand stars light this trail
back to camp.

The frigid night gone,
trees and boulders stretch
creaking.

Dawn canoeist,
oar gentle in the water—
duckling broods.



Howling spring wind —
protected, a fern and I
share this granite nook.

Unruly loud youth
yet pause at evening to hear
concertos of frogs.

Scampering chipmunk,
why do you choose redwoods,
ignoring pines?

A deer blocks the road!
Clouds of thought dissolve.
Stark mountain silence.

The Computer

Electron-inspired words of dots—
phosphorescent fireworks.
Gone.



Christmas Break at Point Reyes

Sun bright, clear crisp air,
forest quiet and hiker
alone.

Frozen brittle grass.
Why, sparrow, do you cheer?
Ah, sunbeam delight!

Silent white aircraft
leaving streamers in its wake. . .
The crescent moon!

Odd looking dung
amid the trail. . .moves!
Such a daring slug.



Endings

Shadow of the pen
drifting with the setting sun—
words lost in darkness.

This silence of dusk—
even ambulance sirens
cannot disturb it.

A bird stands sentry
until, behind western clouds,
the last beam is lost.

Mount Tamalpais
with fleeting crown of moon horns!
Each turn a surprise.



Point Reyes in May

Hiking companions—
Blue damsels and red dragons
weave across the path.

Along the trail,
a pale blue iris
alone in the wind.

Shadow up the tree!
Startled, raccoon and human
gaze at each other.

With great flaps and cries,
the heron spirals atop
the tallest lake pine.

Street Stories

A hovering fly,
silent, spinning left and right,
waiting. But for what?

Leaping from trees,
two squirrels make their highway
telephone wires.



More so in such gray skies,
flowers shine
beckoning.

Infant's cosmos:
a big red balloon brings forth
Buddha's laughing eyes.

Desert Quartet/Northwest Nevada

The dawn horizon—
Along desert mountains glow
red clouds and red rain.

Desert stillness
but for broadcasts of
grasshopper wings.

The desert:
freedom to roam and to sing
for swift coyote.

Tedious sagebrush,
but the shape of mountains!
Old man Lao Tzu smiles.

Urban Renewal

Soft autumn rain
rushing along the new roof
drops to the floor.

First autumn shower:
Parched earth snaps and pops
until it puddles.

Tall telephone poles
gaudy with names and numbers,
I vote for rain clouds.

Through the roar of jets,
a rustling of shade trees,
their leaf showers.

Atop Piedmont's heights—
Machine murmurs still assault
both eardrum and heart.

Hairy spider
waiting in its round web—
waiting still.



Sitting on porch steps,
two laughing women look up,
then down as I pass.


This peace oasis
amid autos and asphalt:
a cemetery.

Dry red leaves
sailing the winds
to lands unknown.

Whispering breeze,
yet the curtains perform
a spirited dance.

Constant companion,
however alone my path:
footsteps.

Ghost buildings emerge
through gray mists of a gray dawn—
a pause in the rain.



Down from pine branches
raindrops drum the umbrella:
December scherzo.

Faceless eyes peer out
walking wombs of wool and down—
winter solstice night.

In hot winter sun
soft white flakes yet fall—
fruit blossoms!

In hard dry winds
walking on red maple leaves:
each step a crunch.

Its life fuel consumed,
the candle flame crackles out.
Vestiges of smoke.



Of No-time and No-place

[1991 – 1992]

High moon of midnight—
blue, its full light ends a year,
starts yet another.

Flowers of trees
leafless in their winter—
Oh, robins!

Three airborne seeds caught
on a spider's hidden strand—
their travels suspended.

West wind and feathers
in perfect balance—
hawk motionless on high.

Passing a courtyard
where sounds of fountain cascades
beget a smile.



Feline moaning
shatters the slumber of night—
sun in the window.

Such a night, this night:
Venus, Jupiter, and Mars
gather with blade moon.

An ocean of fog
shortens the day, hides the night.
Sound of guitar.

The last rains of spring.
In warm windless air, a scent—
sweet firewood smoke.

The shadowless land—
yet another summer day
under numbing fog.

Even more wondrous
among smooth purple and green:
the withered brown bloom!




A hundred dead leaves
scurry along quiet streets—
icy Eastern winds.

Red midnight sky:
Both rich and poor share tears.
Smoky stillness.

Amid grounds now cold,
yet erect, still organic—
chimney and charred tree.

Branch hopping sparrows
send down pink avalanches
in gray winter rains.

Its green but a trace,
a flame upon the dark earth,
this fallen leaf-clock.



Of Mountains and Forests

Big Basin chipmunk:
with every note it cries
its tail dances.

Reaching China Camp
already occupied—
one million black flies.

Evening, not yet night:
sunset red clings to the tops
of redwood giants.

Still forest:
sound of a falling leaf
stops the hiker's steps.

In the fire's glow,
a buck nears, stands guard until
doe and fawn have passed.

Closed—a darkened leaf,
open—an orange flower:
butterfly wings.



Come bikes or babble,
both deer and I flee deeper
into the forest.

Up Mount Diablo
green and free of urban din,
strange birds, new songs.

Traveling

Desert wilderness:
Roads are no barrier
for spinning dust devils.

A mountain haven—
roar of creek, birch tree meadow—
but for these cold bones!

Rapid pulsing wind
suddenly above rise, fall—
a blackness of crow.

Leaving Taos canyon:
against the dark creek torrent,
one clump of white reeds.



In the last light of dusk,
in mountain shadow, yet glow
serpentine train tracks.

Rapt in his reading,
the old man in his old car
ignores the roses.



A Collection of Clouds

[1993]

Dead of winter:
Not a beetle, not a fly
to grace the web.

Ah! Sunbeam warmth.
Ah! Hummingbird.
Ah!: Ah!

Another birthday—
Were they there yesterday,
these many gray hairs?

A small daisy
inspected by a toddler—
the greatest treasure.

Fire invisible,
the Bunsen burner soothes
spring-chilled cheeks.

Return to Big Basin

Forest camp—
soap bubbles soar the winds.
Pop! Pop!

In forest silence
unexpected loneliness
chills the afternoon.

A blackened penny—
but for its roundness, hidden
among pine needles.

Restless night.
I spot the raccoon stealing breakfast
too late.

Under overcast sky
the lone tent.
Sound of distant owl.



From high pine boughs
raindrops drum the tent,
clang the pot.

Creek Trail—
a soggy roadway
for salamanders.

North Coast

Cattle guard crossing.
In water below the slats:
tadpoles!

Three golden poppies
next to a large white stone
perfectly posed.

Eyes on the trail,
a sudden shadow of hawk
freezes my steps.



Alone in silence—
the joy, the sorrow roaming
the Lost Coast.

Crescent moon at sunset.
Now I may ready the bed,
await the stars.

On the beach alone.
Looking back at my footsteps
already gone.

Where river meets sea:
surf, wind, yet stillness to hear
sand grasses squeak.

Cresting the hill—
Mt. Tamalpais!
Home is near and soon.



Dried Flowers

[1994]

Last leaves of one,
buds and blossoms of another.
Paschal moon.

Jagged gusts lift
the corners of my mouth and
a butterfly.

Patch of sun,
dawn flashing of distant leaves:
April wind.

In fading light,
planet-star Jupiter
as the kettle beckons.



Spring Retreat

A vast forest—
yet bees and beetles, flies and ants
come to me.

Now in shadow,
forest bees leave the table,
birds sing of evening.

The creek's roar,
drawing away all thought.
Yet urban unease.

High Sierra slopes—
absence of white but for
their clouds churning.

The fisherman's cast—
Suddenly, my childhood!
Too many bones.

Awakening.
Was it present yesterday?
Scent of decay.



On lake so wide
but one pair of ducks
distantly call.

Heavenly latticework:
cloudy strands from jets
beyond sight, beyond sound.

Sunbeams reveal
millions of tiny flies.
Whence, to where?

Again this morning:
copulating mosquitoes.
Better than biting.

Each climbing granites,
standing for a better view—
gray squirrel and camper.

The crackling creek,
Pure and raw, but for
three Pepsi cans.



The camera, oh!
Left behind. But, ah!
This pen, this paper.

Mountain lake:
its color, its texture,
each moment anew.

For silence I came.
Only stillness of sound I found.
The heart unfulfilled.

Granite slab—
atop a crack, a pine grew
but withered.

The squirrel hopped closer
and closer to inspect
the sitting gray robe.

Rising to depart—
three bows to the squirrel
no longer there.



Return to Reyes

Walking into shade—
sounds of coolness: birds and brook
and echoes, echoes.

In shaded forest
one pine aglow with morning,
one bird in song.

Along the trail,
picking blackberries
soft and sweet.

Becoming each
Chirp. Snap. Rustle. Flutter. Hum.
of mountain forest.



Turning the Wheel

Middle age
doldrums and disappointments.
Summer fog again.

So soon? So soon?
First red leaves on the maple,
Labor Day.

Seung Sahn's Winter Solstice Dharma Talk

The icy church
melts away with mirth, save for
his Cheshire cat grin.



In the Gallery of Blank Canvases

[1995 - 1996]

New Year's Eve again.
Alone again, but for sounds—
breath and passing cars.

Behind the high wall
barren plants before spring.
Shadowless sky.

Rain's soothing sound
against windshield and roof—
motionless travels.

Garden gate ajar. . .
Trumpeting an early spring:
daffodils.



Drawing the drapes back. . .
Fireworks!
A white blossomed tree.

Weeks of gray and gloom
now blue and yellow,
I rush outdoors.

A Cemetery Stroll/New Jersey Blues

Lovers kissed amid
grand headstones and stately tombs
eroding.

The pine grove rumbles
a funeral parade of cars,
but birds still sing.

Leon died. I feel. . .
nothing — for my memories,
his art yet live.



Drizzle and Mist

Snail hordes
cross the path unaware of
my awkward steps.

Spring — early or late?
A hummingbird, perched atop
the yet leafless tree.

Along streets hushed
birds and wind chimes resound
till the next shower.



Washington Snapshots

The Hirshhorn

Such paintings! Such sculptures!
I visit them
again and again.

Paradise Almost Lost

The distant journey
across a warm spring day marred—
thoughts of the morrow.

Georgetown

A patio lunch
more tasty in leaf-filtered light,
sounds of water.

Aerospaced Out

Though they now hang still,
they flew into history,
into our hearts.

The Sackler Exhibit

Village elegance:
the basketmaker's craft.
None for sale.



A Different Museum

Holocaust preserved —
a tour of Hell were it not
known territory.

Hero

Up the temple steps —
This god is Lincoln; his words
strike as arrows.

A Moving Experience

The Vietnam vee:
walking its length, feeling its
tears.

The Other Memorial

Vietnam pietà
composed so eloquently.
Listen! “Med Evac”.

The ASM Meeting

Am I so distinct?
From the throng near strangers
come to greet me.



Turning the Page

The homeward airplane
brings sudden melancholy.
Gray sunset skies.

Seat 32B

Also flying to
San Francisco: a dozen
red roses.

Sanctuary

The world, only this:
orange and gray clouds drifting to
Wynton's dinner jazz.

Great Expectations

Pumpkins on the porch,
faceless yet they stare back.
Halloween ghosts.



Matt Davis/Coastal Trails

Above Stinson Beach—
ocean sighs and shaded woods.
Thoughts of Diana.

Pausing to *sit*.
Mountain woods, trickling water:
the ancient portal.

Transitions

First moon of the year
passes through the window
into my dream.

Long absent, my friend
asks forgiveness, a strange word
this bright windy day.

Under haloed sun
lilies and poppies become
sacred fire.



Biorhythm of the Blues

After sunshine joy
I wake to overcast skies
and a downcast heart.

Melancholic sighs
depart on evening's moon;
the molecules dance.

Dukkha

Sitting jobless
amid rose garden glories—
blue amongst the reds.

In shallows hidden:
countless baby fish beyond
hungry cormorants.



Roamings

As I stroll past homes,
faceless voices arise then
quickly fade away.

Visiting a house
built around an oak tree,
~~that~~ flows through the roof.

Each passing breeze
showers tiny yellow leaves,
dotting the plush grass.

Gazing down as I walk,
avoiding insects and roots. . .
finding a penny!

White balloons ascend
into the blue, vanishing;
yet they remain.

Hearing music
after the music ends:
an arriving train.



Beneath the bough,
ants remove piece by piece
the fallen chick.

English daisy patch:
a dark square-yard forest
to insects and worms.

Amble to Alameda

Watching wavelets
flicker in wind and tide —
a chaos so serene.

Boat harbors—
masts, flags, and bright blue covers. . .
a sudden yen to travel!

The Park Street Bridge:
Walking across the steel,
feeling vibrations.



Meteorology

Beneath Northern stars
the jade comet primeval,
the calls of a frog.

Summer fog
stayed away tonight, but sent
a soft ocean breeze.

In summer twilight
the crescent moon. . .or is it
a slate disk?

October's full moon
spotlights the kitchen counter
and dinner crumbs.

Winter sun.
Strange noon light and shadows
against the mountain.

A Point Reyes *Merry* Christmas

As the full moon sets,
as the fog dissolves, a crow
shrieking.

The tree-bound squirrel leaps,
cracking the branch, leaving
woods in stillness.

A hiker arrives,
asking what I was watching.
“Silence,” my reply.

Beneath Kelham Falls
the Pacific surf surges;
waters meet and merge.

From stream to surf
and back as distant rain clouds
advance to shore.

Yet miles inland,
the plaintive nursery cries
from rock rookeries.



End Game

Another year gone.
Cold air at the window,
empty wet streets.

New Year's Eve incense,
ashen in the sand, its scent
enters the morrow.

Ephemeron

Last sip of tea.
The mirrored face in the mug
disappears.

A Life in Ten Minutes

Countless falling leaves
patter the street — unheard
by children at play.

Passing bicycle,
its ratchet clicks come then go,
leaving memories.

Wind chimes on the wind
snatched between baritone hums
of speeding cars.

Whistling an odd tune,
he grabs the pail and waits
for me to move.

Three knocks at a door. . .
But I leave not knowing if
anyone answered.



Thoughtful Haiku (First Thoughts)

[1987-1996]

Lowering Expectations at Hetch Hetchy

Across the dam road
the tunnel marks the trail:
the entrance of Hell.

Falling on the path—
The weight of the pack becomes
the burden of age.

Utter exhaustion.
Liquid from every pore,
but the sound of birds!

The wall of karma
rising far above this peak,
I retreat homeward.



Samsara

Even Sequoias
older than the Buddha
must die someday.

The Beginning

An empty white page—
Cold snow hides a universe of
unborn colors.

An Encounter

So young, so earnest:
the Mormon missionary.
And so bound by words.

Bibles quote your God?
Ah, well, but I listen to
irises.



Masks

Reviewing my life:
Who was that person? Was it
me? And that? And that?

Samadhi

This biscotti,
slowly crunched and chewed,
destroys time-space.

Sutras

Inspiration
eludes me again.
No, even this is worthy!

Practicing *tai chi*. . .
What better moment for
rain to arrive?



Research

She wanders the streets,
willfully meandering,
to meet the new.

Matinee

Seated in shadow
within the empty theater;
awaiting escape.

Not One, Not Two

Beneath Kelham Falls
the Pacific surf surges,
merging with itself.



Unemployment

[1986]

Brahmin daughter of Science
cast down into the desiccating samsara-abys,
my ready spirit and earthly power are as
empty as their origin.

Grasping illusive supports,
clutching to heart
words of the Path,
I struggle upwards
while disappearing inwards,
expecting nothing or everything,
the moon-pointing finger mirrored by the tear.

Decades of deviations from the fiction,
a fishing float tossed about the karmic oceans,
I open my middle eye to the membraneless contours
and laugh,
for what else is left
as I speechless
let go of the cliff-hanging tree?
To see again the mountain
that I have never seen before,
I must rid myself of that obsessive ox.
Grass is green and the eyes hear.



A sangha of friends
attempt economic resuscitation through
compassionate infusions of words, bistro meals,
and simply being so,
yet how can they prevail
when they themselves are but
shadows within the flame?
The implicate consciousness of
neti, neti, cosmos and void
is still. is still alone.
So why do I now cling and focus on this fear?

Interpenetrating mind vortices,
ever whimsically manifesting
evolution, development to whatever, wherever
for itself and no more.
Yes, Alan Watts,
as you gaze
at the edge of your razor,
matter does not matter,
so let us share some tea in Bodhidharma's cave.
Symphonic samadhi silence brings all cacophony into accord,
like the passing Point Reyes grays and the guardian barking deer.



Kwatz! The rinpoche's smile
permeates the realm,
placating our own besieged Tibet.
The dharma comes to the West.

Chanting the Heart Sutra:

Beyond time, how can mind end
if it did not begin?
Beyond space, Cubist-Impressionistic images arise
as mind observes mind.

Quiet now, quiet now, quiet, now.

Will the fathom leviathan at last raise me onto the beach so near?



Descartes said, "I think, therefore I am." I ask you: When not thinking, then what?

— Seung Sahn

Before Thought

[1987]

Happy sunset prism galaxian spectra enchant
the ceiling and play brilliant along shadowed corners
as the soft Saturday glowing cloud puffs calmly settle
into a transcendent, iridescent moonlit evening:
Satisfaction, sweetly soothing.

The tai chi morning and calligraphic noon smoothly lead
to a lit night incense stick sending forth aromatic
delight and serpentine spiritual smoke, which enhance
timeless periods of weightless, flowing, zafu sitting:
Serenity, starkly simple.

Sounds of night far and clear: fire engine screaming siren;
childish squeals and chortles; two yelps of a sad mu dog;
and with the first planet star, last good-night peeps from bird trees
accompanied by the gust-driven alto chime next door:
Absorption, acutely aware.



Befitting Cage's noteless score, the olio transforms
immediately, freely into a joyous music,
where we staunch mountains hum bass and we nimble clouds whisper
that life and self are empty concepts, yet we live and die:

Awe, audibly articulate.

The dissolved ego at peace now suddenly emerges,
knowing itself as both audience and player, chording
arpeggios of cosmic process, it cheerfully sings
the mystic algebra of the holeless shakuhachi.

Freedom, fathomlessly festive.

Question 108 [1987]

What noble tyrant is that drive
so obstinate, so dominant a glue,
which dares complacent Ego to ask, What is?
This infectious seed, chronically burning deep
into the ramshackle patchwork canopy,
spreading doubt to all corners smooth,
demanding thinking answers to nonthinkable thirsts:
What am I really? What is life, what is mind?
What was before the whirling stuff of Universe?
And ask not why?

The parachute floats to nowhere, an odyssey alone.
Death and other conceptions vanish
between the jumping quanta of the photon sea.
Freedom, fearless and false, manifest astonishingly
when pregnant emptiness begets euphoric cheer,
and as winds play sweet songs upon the wooden fish,
all paradoxical paradigms dissolve in a shudder.
Tell me about love. Behold, it cannot be done!
Tell me about choice, and you cannot avoid a blunder.
We merely witness our processes.
My voiceless cry of painless torment,
reaching for the specter promise of peace,
I sense the turning of the dharma wheel.
Human compulsion for the frontier, I experiment inherently,
climbing the evolutionary mountains of Vulcan,
searching inexhaustibly for the mythic fleece,
and probe the fun-house reflections of Indra's net.



My arrow is certain if I let slide my cloak.
Scientist, philosophic mystic, I need not hide, need not trek,
the target being here all along.

The amorphous metaphysical inquisitor
survives through answers approximate,
and thinking, incapable for even these.
Experience alone transcends the enchained realm
of opaque wordy actions and skeletal nomenclature,
but thought, yang feedback governor, explorer alit,
strengthens, quickens, lay bridges to the source.
On practice Buddha-killing meditation, concentration,
Kwatz! The gentle spring rain cools the running horse,
the potter shapes a vase.



Weather Report

[1987]

Silent dawn sun orb diffused and ghosted
by the armored roof of Drake's stinking, clouding fog,
the dank charcoal gray mood at last crackles apart
as wisps of lemon cotton dissolve to a haze of transparent blue:
an architectural kaleidoscope of subtle hues, tones, and textures.
A wind gust arises, gasps the disembarkation and whispers away,
but the fog retreats only to Divisadero Street, waiting to devour anew.
The welcome dance of infra red at last sparkles upon San Francisco,
its yet vacant shadowed steeled buildings,
and me.

A sound, then a noise, now a din, a cacophony,
the city crescendo of crazed labor, siren screams, babies hungry,
and the disgusted trash can rattle of the night's bourbon burden.
Seven o'clock: crawling tense frustration, a parade of somber,
automatic pilot commuters funnel and queue along uncompassionate
highways and bridges, surrendering money for the privilege.
Thumpa-thumpa radio woofers deafen the empty-eyed ghetto driver
and numb the consciousness of the forgotten and the ignored.
I, too, surround myself in an automobile cocoon,
observing.



Elevator up to power craving, bottom-line boardrooms,
where workers' inner needs, potential, and talent do not compute;
Escalator down to electrified subterranean mole trains, a million feet
in blind rushed pursuit of economic survival, no one laughs.
At noon the edifice organism of interacting cellular phones and
cellular people exhales, discharging its fleeing feeders
to sunny bland plazas chilled frigid by skyscraper downdrafts.
But Golden Gate Park and the University drip fog and suffer gales.
No matter. For the windowless laboratories, every day
the same.

Fulfilling its summer cycle, patient fog cautiously treads inland,
the exhausted populace choking back to their sanctuary home: a race
to enjoy the last sunlight rays and an evening star, a chance,
only a moment, to awake beyond the close at hand and be free.
The fog, furry blanket, pours down the hills, licking the littered street,
smothering the foul exhaust of beeping infested diesel transporters.
The fog cries but protects, holding warmth, bringing darkness early.
San Francisco, sweet maverick city, I will not experience your balmy
clear evenings until the autumn, when you break the gloom
and smile.



Liturgy of Four

[1996]

When did it take place?

Was it during the Great Migration, when nations and peoples tired of starvation and persecution? My brother asked me to go to the Americas with him, and I packed. We were the immigrant adventurers.

Was it during the Great Depression, when nations and peoples plunged into poverty and despair? My brother asked me to spare a dime, but I had none to offer. We were the unemployed masses.

Was it during the Great Youth Rebellion, when nations and peoples reevaluated their dreams and status? My brother asked me to search not without, but within, and I inhaled the quest. We were the notorious avant-garde.

Was it during the Great Capitalistic Victory, when nations and peoples forgot compassion and dignity? My brother asked me to buy the latest technology, but I was jobless yet again. We were the estranged, ever more distant.

Where did it occur?

Was it at Verdun, where nations and peoples crushed optimism and themselves? My brother asked me to save democracy, but I found poison gas and disease. We were the gullible patriots.



Was it at Dachau, where nations and peoples
became faceless and ashen? My brother asked me
to kill the criminal beast, but I saw only mirrors. We were
the well-oiled gears.

Was it at Prague, where nations and peoples
demanded change and freedom? My brother asked me
to join the rally, and I linked arms and lit my candle. We were
the brazenly hopeful.

Was it at Sarajevo, where nations and peoples
returned to hatred and ignorance? My brother asked me
to partition the neighborhood, but I walked away. We were
the divided, nonetheless.

Why did it happen?

Was it because the ancient nations and peoples
needed practicality with caring? My brother asked me
to join the Ch'an monastery, and we *sat* and tended fields. We were
the peaceful teachers.

Was it because the old nations and peoples
searched the depths of suffering and endurance? My brother asked me
to write a novel, but I composed music instead. We were
the romantic ethicists.

Was it because the recent nations and peoples
had to rebuild and develop? My brother asked me
to forge a brighter, healthier future, and I became a scientist. We were
the unwary optimists.

Was it because the present nations and peoples
lost their myth and sense of purpose? My brother asked me
to find a social niche, but I asked if it provided a living. We were
the weary cynics.



Oh, humanity, facing the millennium, what have you learned thus far?

Have you finally understood that
progress does not mean more and better?

Have you finally understood that
people are more important than money and power?

Have you finally understood that
there is no finality?

Have you finally understood that
it cannot be understood?



Glossary & Notes

Dharma

A term with multiple meanings: truth; law; the body of teachings; a phenomenon; reality.

Dukkha

Discontent or disharmony, commonly associated with suffering, arising from unfulfilled craving. Part of Buddha's four noble truths.

Indra's Net

Metaphor of the interpenetration and mutual arising of phenomena. The Indian deity Indra throws a net in which at every node is a multifaceted jewel that reflects all other jewels in the net.

Karma

Action or change and its consequences that affect a life and that also span individual births. The last point does not necessarily refer to reincarnation; in modern scientific paradigms, we can speak of phylogenetic inherited behavior and Jung's collective unconsciousness.

LaoTzu

The author of the Tao Te Ching, which is the foundation work of Taoism.

Moktak

Korean name for a wooden percussive instrument used also in China and Japan to accompany chanting. Also known as a wooden fish.



Rinpoche

A high lama in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition.

Samadhi

Single-pointed meditative concentration.

Samsara

The normally perceived world of life-and-death.

Sangha

The community of monks and nuns and Buddhist lay practitioners.

Sutra

A scripture that reports a dialogue or sermon of the Buddha.

Tai chi (tai chi chuan)

A Chinese martial exercise of concentration, balance, breath, and flowing movement.

Wooden fish

See moktak.

Yang

In Taoism, yin and yang are dynamic interpenetrating polar opposites of attributes of phenomena. Yang's aggressiveness, for instance, is counterbalanced by yin's passivity.

Zafu

A round cushion used in sitting meditation.



NOTES:

108

The number of beads on a Buddhist rosary, it is a folk measure equivalent to *myriad*. This number, like its multiples 432 and 864, figures in the ancient cyclic cosmologies of India, Mesopotamia, and their regions of influence. For instance, 4,320,000,000 years comprise a kalpa, a day and night of Brahma, and in the Babylonian tradition the period from creation of the first city to the mythological Flood was 432,000 years. Of interest is the somewhat disconcerting fact that astronomers estimate the age of Earth as between 4 and 4.65 billion years. The root number of human centered mythological cosmologies may be 864, since it is derived from the number heart beats or arterial pulses in a day (86,400 @ 60/minute).

Bodhidharma's cave

Bodhidharma (407?-532?) is the legendary Buddhist monk who came to China from India. He is regarded as the first Chinese patriarch of Ch'an (Zen) and pioneer of the martial exercise kung fu, and is said to have mediated continually in a cave above Shaolin temple for nine years.

cliff-hanging tree

From a koan and analogy of the spiritual crisis. A person is hanging by the teeth from a branch of a tree on the side of cliff. With legs and arms tied, the person is obliged to answer the famous koan on the marrow of Zen, "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West". To speak is to fall to death, but to decline to answer will also result in loss of life.

holeless shakuhachi

A shakuhachi is a Japanese bamboo recorder or flute. The phrase is akin to the "sound of one hand".



Liturgy of Four

The Japanese associate “4” with “death/lifelessness/insensibility” because the kanji characters for the two words are pronounced similarly.

moon-pointing finger

The Western equivalent is “the map is not the territory”, i.e., do not confuse the everyday world of matter phenomena (finger) with the true essence of reality (moon).

mu dog

From a primary koan. *Mu* is Japanese and Korean for “without” or “no”. The Buddha said that all sentient beings are Buddha nature, but master Chao-Chou, when asked whether a dog has Buddha nature, answered, “mu [wu in Chinese]”.

neti, neti

A Hindu approach of elimination, “not this, not that”, until linear logic fails in paradox.

obsessive ox

Refers to the ten sequential ox-herding pictures, metaphors of the spiritual path, from searching for the ox, to riding it, to forgetting it, to reentering the marketplace as an enlightened being.

see again the mountain

A reference to the three stages of Zen practice epitomized in the expression, “When I began to study Zen, mountains were mountains; when I thought I understood Zen, mountains were not mountains; but when I came to full realization, mountains were again mountains.”

