

Haiku, Vipassana meditation and ineluctable relationships

In *Traces of Dreams*, Haruo Shirane exposes the Western myth that haiku shares an ineluctable relationship with Zen, a relationship now also rejected by many haiku scholars and practitioners, as Charles Trumbull notes in *Juxta 1.1*. Nevertheless, the posing of such a connection leads me, a writer of haiku and a practitioner of Vipassana meditation, to consider how far the fundamental principles of Vipassana meditation are evident in haiku.

By Vipassana meditation, I mean Vipassana as taught by S.N. Goenka in the tradition of U Ba Khin. This practice has been passed down from monk to lay teacher from the time of the Buddha till now. In it, a meditator focusses their attention on what is happening within the framework of the body: the touch and movement of the natural breath and any physical sensations arising on the body – whether it be tickling, itching, tingling, throbbing, heat, cold, dryness or moisture.

The classic understanding of haiku as focussing on phenomena in nature also indicates an emphasis on what is physical. In haiku, however, this emphasis tends to be on the phenomena themselves rather than any physical sensations they might elicit in the observer. The view is often directed outward, to the world outside the body:

Flowing in the spring rain – a wide river
(Buson, trans. by Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson)

although sometimes, the poet's presence and specific location are strongly implied, as in Basho's

In my hut, square light cast by the window moon
(trans. by Hiroaki Sato and Burton Watson)

However, haiku that keep their focus on physical phenomena that arise within the framework of the body, as in Vipassana meditation, are much less common. In Issa's

leaving the town
breathing is easier
firefly
(trans. by David G. Lanoue)

focus on the breath only occurs with 'breathing is easier'. The rest of the haiku brings in the outside world again. More sustained in terms of a focus on physical bodily phenomena, is his

growing old –
one drop of sweat
soon, another
(trans. by David G. Lanoue)

The following haiku by Kaneko Tohta also stands out in this respect,

in long-lived
vague mist
eyeballs...
(trans. Kon Nichi Translation Group)

The same applies to his spellbinding

an autumn crab
within the light
in my brain
(trans. Kon Nichi Translation Group)

This poem appears initially to be focussed on an external crab but, as we read, we are taken into the brain. In a recent *Presence* I also find C. X. Turner moving from outer physical stimulus to a reference to sensation,

cat café
the feel of fur
biting into sponge cake
(Presence 74, p. 88)

Still, it is more usual in haiku, when the emphasis is on the body and physical sensation, for the tendency to be to move outward. In these two haiku, attention shifts from a reference to the body out into nature or the outside world,

I forget where to put myself – the heat (Chiyo-jo, trans. Ishibashi and Donegan)	something behind me tingles my spine... cherry blossoms! (Issa, trans. Lanoue)
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This is not to say that the purpose of Vipassana meditation is to focus on a sense of self. Quite the contrary. Vipassana meditation works towards developing awareness of the impermanence of everything. This impermanence also applies to the self. As meditators observe the phenomena that arise on the body, dissecting and dividing them, they come to realise the insubstantiality of both body and observer. Underneath the surface is nothing solid. There is no self. This realisation is central to Vipassana.

We could say that focus in haiku on the external world, away from a sense of the physical or mental self of the haiku writer, can have the effect of diminishing a sense of self, as in Colin Oliver's lovely

fetching us
from ourselves
the owl calling
(*Presence* 73, p. 69)

But once again what is missing in Oliver's haiku, in terms of drawing a parallel with Vipassana meditation, is focus on the framework of the body.

Perhaps closer to what I am looking for is Philip Murrell's

neutrinos he gives his palms a closer look
(*Presence* 74, p. 84)

for in Vipassana meditation, the meditator remains detached and balanced, simply observing whatever comes up on the body with the knowledge that it will pass. All things change, all things are impermanent, including neutrinos. And acceptance of this awareness comes with no attempt to manipulate, control, imagine or visualise the sensations that are observed. Instead the focus is on developing awareness of the impermanence of all things, like the ephemeral cherry or plum blossom in haiku,

without regret
they fall and scatter...
cherry blossoms

(Issa, trans. by David G Lanoue)

so sad, so sad
to miss the plum flower
before it fell

(Chiyo-jo, trans. by
Ishibashi and Donegan)

However, to my mind, such cherry (and plum) blossom haiku often carry a sense of nostalgia or regret. Even Issa's 'without regret' seems to foreground regret. I often find in haiku that a sense of impermanence of this fleeting world comes with longing and desire for that world to continue. Vipassana meditators work to reach a state where they are simply observing without craving, and are accepting reality as it is, simply arising and passing away. The difference again is subtle, but significant.

The simple observation of Vipassana meditation is very difficult to achieve. It is so much our daily habit to control, evaluate, dominate, crave, suppress whatever we experience or observe. To practise instead continued effortless observation, accepting what is there with the knowledge that it will change, but without desiring it to change or stay, takes effort. But the pay-off is huge. Remaining in that state of awareness of the impermanence of what is happening on the body, balanced and accepting of this without craving or suppressing anything, leads to a diminution and eventually an eradication of tension. Such tension, both present and past, is stored physically in the body and its release brings a great sense of peace even in the rockiest of storms – an experience that haiku may well hint at, even though the focus remains external, as in the light and needles of

breaking up the fear spring light (Jenny Fraser, <i>Presence</i> 70, p. 95)	pearl sunrise softening the sharpest of needles (Claire Vogel Camargo, <i>Presence</i> 74, p. 58)
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So my conclusion is that while I find elements in haiku chime with Vipassana meditation, and while I would like to try to work for such resonances in my own poems, there is, as in the case of Zen, and, I suspect, other meditation and spiritual practices, no ineluctable relationship to be had.

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References and further reading

Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory and the Poetry of Basho*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998

Charles Trumbull, 'Shangri-La: James W. Hackett's Life in Haiku', Juxta 1.1 , <https://thehaikufoundation.org/juxta/juxta-1-1/#juxta1-articles>

Vipassana Meditation <https://www.dhamma.org/en/index>