

RICHARD JEFFERIES & ZEN BUDDHISM

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THE INTRODUCTION TO MY BOOK OF
FOUND HAIKU FROM RICHARD JEFFERIES
SOMETHING BEYOND THE STARS
MORE OR LESS AS IT APPEARED IN 1993

Something Beyond the Stars may be of interest to at least three kinds of people: Richard Jefferies enthusiasts; adherents of Zen Buddhism and haiku fanatics. Assembling it, I found myself wearing all three hats turn and turnabout; it got so the *camera obscura* spun round so rapidly that a Fourth Hat [or Way] emerged decorated with composite favours.

The book was produced for a specific occasion: an address to the *Richard Jefferies Society* in Swindon on 8 November 1993. I made the reasonable assumption that members present on that occasion were sure to recognise allusions to the works and ideas of Richard Jefferies. So I started from a Zen Buddhist angle.

The connection between Zen and an English Nature Mystic, close observer of the natural scene, is easy to discover: it has often been pointed out that, whilst not necessarily subscribing to a Zen way of thinking, writers from an other-than-Japanese tradition often demonstrate moments of characteristically Zen sensibility by embedding within the larger body of their text images imbued with the spirit of 'haiku' – the literary expression of Zen moments of Singular Awareness, or 'Suchness', with special reference to Nature.

R.H. Blyth, who did so much to bring haiku to the attention of the Western world, in *A History of Haiku* (Hokuseido Press 1963), for instance, quotes amongst other things, the last three lines of Keats' *Ode to Autumn* as an example of a Westerner in a haiku frame of mind:-

...and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden croft,
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

A haiku-writer might have put it thus:-

garden croft red-breast
whistling – gathering swallows
twitter in the skies

Marshalling contrasts of this sort, the haiku can reverberate in the mind left to its own devices: what here can be read as a simple garden scene with robins and swallows can also deftly provide feelings about the time of year – the robin who will stay in the garden, small noise, awkward flight, against the swallows gathering for migration with their broad sweep of flight – so much suggested so economically.

But Blyth dismisses Jefferies as a source of haiku-moments because he says he ‘gushes’. Whatever Jefferies does, he is without doubt, a valuable source of haiku-moments, indeed it could be argued that his whole philosophy is built upon such moments of awareness; what Blyth mistakes for ‘gushing’ is Jefferies constantly seeking to express ideas for which, as he said, he lacked the language and therefore had to expend more words than were necessary on explaining his ‘philosophy’.

I have had as it were seventeen years of consciousness of my own inability to express this idea of my life. I can only say that many of these short sentences are the result of long-continued thought. One of the greatest difficulties I have encountered is the lack of words to express ideas. (*The Story of My Heart*)

When he died in 1887, Jefferies was planning an enlarged or revised version of *The Story of My Heart*. In his notebook he suggested that the new ‘...ms should indicate by flowers or sea rather than crystallise in aphorism...’ What he wanted was ‘...immediate proof in the intense Sun Life...’; otherwise he would, he felt, ‘lose the meaning in words’. It is precisely by indicating, by direct pointing, that haiku-writers, within the spirit of Zen, signal moments of awareness.

Elsewhere, Blyth does make a comparison between what he describes as a ‘romantic’ haiku by Bashō:-

a flower unknown
to bird and butterfly –
the sky of autumn

and Jefferies’

The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is rest of heart.

David Cobb, one time Secretary, then President, of *The British Haiku Society*, compiler and editor of *The Genius of Haiku – Readings from R.H. Blyth on poetry, life and Zen*, [reprinted in 2019] writes that ‘the implication is, surely, that Blyth thought Jefferies was a romantic and touches on areas of

perception/expression ventured into by Bashō when he (Bashō) was in romantic mood'. In fact, being 'romantic' is distinctly un-Zen.

I show that, in his first thoughts, contained in his notebooks, Jefferies was unromantically Zen in his outlook.

In his *Studies in Zen*, D.T. Suzuki neatly puts his finger on the difference between a Zen approach to writing and that which derives from a Western mentality. He quotes Bashō's

when I look carefully
I see the nazuna blooming
by the hedge!

Here Bashō is at one with nature; it is something of an afterthought for him to produce the exclamation mark – nothing special but, at the same time, extra-specially mysterious to note the relationship between the stooping man and the wild flower we call 'shepherd's purse'.

Such an attitude Suzuki compares tellingly with Tennyson's *Flower in Crannied Wall* – again a man perhaps stooping to see the little flower but what Tennyson does is to pluck the flower, seeking to understand it 'root and all' in order to get to the meaning of life, death and the universe. Nothing could be further from Bashō's mind: Tennyson is intellect, conscious mind; Bashō identifies with flower and that's it.

In *The Nature Diaries and Notebooks of Richard Jefferies*, edited by Samuel J. Looker (Grey Walls Press, 1948), there is ample evidence that Jefferies approached what he saw in the world around him with a sensibility akin to Bashō's – see, for example, the 'shepherd's purse haiku' derived from a note dated 27 April 1881:-

shepherd's purse in flower
cuckoo returns to the copse
in the same old place

In writing *The Story of My Heart*, Jefferies struggled to express this sensibility from what he thought of as an inappropriate, though singularly moving, conscious mind, in a Western kind of way. These twin drives resulted in the mental conflict that surfaces frequently in his writing and which he was, apparently, going to tackle in the unfortunately never-embarked upon revised version:- **The sea saves the trouble of thinking...**

What exactly is Zen Buddhism? Ask this question of a Zen Master, who may seem like a rogue, happy tramp or lunatic, and he will reputedly throw his fan out of the window, empty a glass of water on the floor, say he'll tell you when there's nobody around, or make cryptic comments like, 'To be Zen you must be un-Zen...' None of which is very helpful to anybody who, by reason of their

upbringing and education, only recognises a wheelbarrow full of words as being a sufficient explanation of a knotty concept.

On the other hand, if you are happy with silence or minimal explanations, absence of labels, lack of categories, wordlessness, then you are more likely to achieve a kind of at least partial enlightenment from what the Zen master says or does. But nothing is certain!

It is a matter of 'human nature' to see, feel or hear things through pre-programmed frameworks of ideas – categories which set us apart from the world as it really is, in itself. Looked at with an open frame of mind, Tennyson's flower in the crannied wall remains the flower in the crannied wall and that's that. As Jefferies says, '...We find the same earth everywhere – because we look with the same eyes; we want some more eyes and a different mind...' (Looker: *Op. Cit.*) Or no-mind at all – using any words limits ideas to what it is they describe. 'I have an inspiration and then carefully destroy it with rationalism...' (Looker: *Ibid*)

If we're not careful, by categorising things we limit the possibility of taking a fresh look at them; we create unnecessary pigeon-holes. Above all, Zen avoids the dualistic mode common to Western thinking which looks at the world thus:-

Observer–Observed
Thinker–Things thought
Inspiration–Things Inspirational
Thought–Action
Self–Others

In Zen there is no dualism: there are observations, thinking without subject/object dichotomy, relationships with exclamation marks, action is spontaneous – an inevitable corollary of thinking – everything is self, including events and relationships.

When we look for things there is nothing but mind;
when we look for mind there is nothing but things.

So the Zen master '...wants the student to have the attitude of a tree – the attitude of purposeless growth in which there are no short cuts because every stage of the way is both a beginning and an end...' (Alan Watts: *The Way of Zen*, Pelican Books) It is just possible that, before accepting the ecological benefits of existing as a tree, one might need a few words of explanation; if so, they are likely to be something like this: *The world is not going anywhere so there's no point in hurrying – there is no goal so take it easy...* Just stay rooted.

And, in a nice paradox, a mode of thinking congenial to Zen:-

The purposeful life has no content, no point; it hurries on and misses everything. Not hurrying, the purposeless life misses nothing. (Watts: *Op Cit*)

Jefferies echoes this approach:-

Religion, politics. Both have no real meaning. They are counters with which the game of life is played... Waste of intelligence of the race—building, making income, all that ought to be done by now... (Looker: Op Cit)

For Zen, the past is empty, the future aimless; the inevitable vacuum is filled by the present moment which is timeless. And this is exactly where Jefferies finds himself: 'My soul has never been, and never can be, dipped in time...' By the tumulus of the long dead warrior he writes: –

It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine. I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air... The years, the centuries, the cycles are absolutely nothing; it is only a moment since this tumulus was raised; in a thousand years more it will be only a moment. To the soul there is no past and no future; all is and will be ever, in now... The clock may take time for itself; there is none for me... The dragon-fly which passed me traced a continuous descent from the fly marked on stone in [the old time]. The immense time lifted me like a wave rolling under a boat; my mind seemed to raise itself as the swell of cycles came... like a shuttle the mind shot to and fro the past and the present in an instant... (The Story of My Heart)

A haiku-poet, leaving explication to the reader, might have rendered this writing thus:-

dragon-fly passing;
fossil-fly on this rock-face
& the time between?

Clocks drive a wedge between sensation and experience; once demolish consideration of time and you are left with immediate experience; just pointing your finger at whatever happens helps you to achieve clarity, detail, focus:-

burning leaves on an autumn evening
an unseen waterfall at dusk
flight of pigeons against thundercloud
the cry of a bird in a forest

The momentary apprehension of experiences like these, listed by Alan Watts, out of time, can act as markers for the present moment, anchors for experience as a whole, unity with what-is. When you try to explain the experience you lose the point. It is Suchness.

In Zen, as opposed to standard Buddhism, you can achieve a kind of enlightenment in a flash without having to go seven times round the universe. The experience is called *satori*. Alan Watts describes this as an immediate

apprehension of Suchness which 'teases the mind out of thought, dumbfounding the chatter of definition so that there is nothing left to be said. Jefferies was aware of the concept of Nirvana which he describes as 'intense absorption and joy in the tiniest insect and the blade of grass... entering so intensely into the feelings and life of all things that I even lost dislike of frog or toad and snake...'; this perhaps contributed to his notion of 'The Beyond' – which, in *Bevis*, is only reached by one person every thousand years (in the chapter called 'The Other Side') – clearly something almost impossible to achieve in Jefferies' eyes. It is a pity that he did not have the concept of 'satori' because what he demonstrably does achieve many times over is an immediate apprehension of Suchness, beyond which it may not be necessary to have any other kind of awareness to feel at least a tremor of enlightenment about the nature of things.

In *Living by Zen* (Rider & Co, 1950), D.T. Suzuki defines the experience of satori as getting to the 'originally pure' – 'that which is unconditioned, undifferentiated, devoid of all determination; it is a kind of superconsciousness in which there is no opposition of subject and object... but still full awareness of things...' He goes on to make a distinction between two broad kinds of knowledge, a distinction towards which Jefferies, in that individual way that makes him such a powerful figure to anybody who once comes under his spell, was always working:-

Zen masters wish us to see into that unconscious consciousness which accompanies our ordinary dualistically-determined consciousness... the unconscious of the Zen master is more logical or epistemological than psychological; it is a sort of undifferentiated knowledge, or knowledge of non-distinction, or transcendental Prajna-knowledge...

Prajna-knowledge is all-knowledge, holistic, non-analytical – as opposed to Vijnana, which is our ordinary, everyday, measured, differentiated knowledge that shuts us off from other possibilities:-

The intense concentration of the mind on mechanical effects appears often to render it incapable of perceiving anything that is not mechanical... (The Story of My Heart)

It is not absolutely necessary to go to Zen Buddhism to get a handle on Jefferies' thinking processes. Relatively recent studies on the way the brain works would have provided Jefferies with another convenient set of labels for the processes he was struggling with, possession of the concepts behind which might have saved him a good deal of anguish and sense of failure but deprived us of his magical 'ponderings'. Mere idle speculation! But he was so close to the Left Brain/Right Brain distinction: '...the mind [Left Brain] has its logic and

exercise of geometry and thus assisted brings a great force to the solution of problems; the soul [Right Brain] remains untaught and can effect little...' Again, '...mind-conscious analysis [Left Brain function] ends in materialism; the soul-unconscious [Right Brain] is always transcendental and so real'. (Suzuki, with my square bracket inserts)

If one is so inclined, this can easily be related to Zen: the Left Brain is at home with what Jefferies recognises as important aspects of Vijnana-knowledge – measurement, labelling, pigeon-holing, calculating, logic; the Right Brain is Prajna – spontaneous, pattern-making, poetically connecting this and that – all undernourished capabilities in Western culture. Jefferies clearly felt operating solely in the Left Brain to be restricting – he had a need to '...get outside our circle of ideas...', to break the boundaries of what he called 'Design Mind' operations, dictated by 'shark-life', to reach out with the 'Beyond Mind':-

Distance, design, space, motion [Left Brain categories] – these have to be overcome, removed from the mind – obliterated before I can begin to understand. None of these outside this little earth existence... (Looker Op Cit)

or recognised by the Right Brain where 'inspiration is an accident of thought...' as Jefferies says.

The Right Brain conceives the world holistically, achieves Undifferentiated Unity in the flash that characterises *satori*. So Jefferies:-

With the earth, the sun and sky, the stars hidden by the light, with the ocean I prayed, as if these were the keys of an instrument, of an organ, with which I swelled forth the notes of my soul... Sometimes... I became lost and absorbed into the being or existence of the universe. I felt down deep into the earth under and high above into the sky and farther still to the sun and stars. Still farther beyond the stars into the hollow of space and losing thus my separateness of being came to seem like a part of the whole...

Jefferies' prayer is not just hyperbole; it is solidly grounded in specific observations. It comes

...through every grass blade in the thousand thousand grasses; through the million leaves, veined and edge-cut on bush and tree; through the song notes and the marked feathers of the birds; through the insects' hum and the colour of butterflies...

A haiku-writer might be happy with something like:-

from every grass-blade
& colour of butterflies—
the notes of my soul

Whilst never to be taken too seriously, there is a certain discipline to Zen: to arrive at moments of satori requires some route to mental enhancement; something that will lead to conceptual clarification, the feeling of being at one with your surroundings. Jefferies describes one very effective way of achieving this at the beginning of *The Story of My Heart*, though, as always, he admits that the act of putting the experience into words is difficult – ‘...clumsy indeed are all words the moment the wooden stage of commonplace life is left...’ However, the laborious act of climbing Liddington Hill gave him the trance-state he desired: ‘...By the time I had reached the summit I had entirely forgotten the petty circumstances and the annoyances of existence. I felt myself – myself...’

This became a habitual cast of mind and he found he could summon up his prayer whenever he wanted. He had become congruent with himself – himself. ‘It requires no waking, no renewal; it is always with me. I am it; the fact of my existence expresses it’. Even at times when his work ‘...was most uncongenial... sometimes a gleam of sunlight on the wall, the buzz of a bee at the window, would bring the thought to me. Only to make me miserable, for it was a waste of golden time while the rich sunlight streamed on hill and plain...’ What made Jefferies miserable has often served me as an anchor of survival when in uncongenial surroundings. Speaking personally, I might have written the following many times during the early false starts in my so-called ‘career’ or even relatively recently when stuck in some pointless bored meeting :-

working at a desk
in a dull office & then –
sunlight on the wall

Jefferies emphasises the excellence of idleness – ‘absence of the necessity to work for subsistence’ – in Zen this would be defined as ‘sitting quietly doing nothing’ – presupposing that one could ever ‘do’ nothing... He is quite clear that: –

...there will not be any sum or outcome or result of this ceaseless labour and movement; it vanishes in the moment that it is done, and in a hundred years’ nothing will be there, for nothing is there now. There will be no more sum or result than accumulates from the motion of a revolving cowl on a housetop...

In the same way that the ‘poems’ in this book were produced, the essence of this piece of writing gives rise to:-

cowl on a housetop
gathering as much outcome
as ceaseless labour

If anything, this is more of a senryu than a haiku – a wry comment on human life, satire, irony; a senryu is written in the same form as a haiku but does not contain the same kind of emphasis on Nature and seasonal flux. Both derive from a momentary awareness, a sudden insight into the unapologetic scheme of things.

It is interesting that at the end of *The Story of My Heart*, Jefferies returns to the pure sources of his Soul-life; neither grand thoughts, nor philosophical ideas can be sustained – what does persist is the awareness of trees, clouds, sweet short rain, sunbeams, flower-scented air, finches singing among the fresh green leaves of beeches, wheat waving, long grass foam-flecked with flower – all ‘fresh food’ for the soul. The seamless flow of trance.

What is Soul-life but the apprehension of these things? The dichotomy of observer and observed annihilated. That’s all!

And why do I think the way I do nowadays? Because I first read *The Story of My Heart* when I was 15 years old! Practically everything I imagine I think comes from then: I do not think of myself as having had ‘a career’ – the concept is alien to me as is the money it undoubtedly regularly showered in my direction. I have been a very active early-retired layabout for nearly 30 years – I doubt this would have been the case had I not met Jefferies at 15.



This collection of haiku and senryu is drawn predominantly from Samuel Looker’s *Nature Diaries and Notebooks of Richard Jefferies*. Consisting of undigested, non-intellected, field observations, spontaneous jottings, they are crammed with what might be called ‘haiku-moments’. I took Jefferies’ words and put them into the form that, as a valuable discipline, I choose to use for writing my own haiku/senryu – three lines with 5-7-5 syllables respectively. Though some rearrangement was necessary in order to achieve this, the poems remain, I think, quintessential Jefferies: I am merely the anthologist and re-interpreter a hundred years on; I hope he might have found this introduction at least interesting.

Each poem is dated in accordance with Looker’s dating of diary items.



for ten thousand years
sun shadows pass on the wall
then this violet blooms
Hills and the Vale

the man long buried
under this high tumulus –
blue butterfly floats
The Story of My Heart



[Not that it matters much, but since 2009 I no longer adhere to the 5-7-5 system; I now write what are called 'free-form' haiku...]

Something Beyond the Stars is, unfortunately, out of print. It would take quite a bit of arm-twisting to get me to reprint it especially since I seem to have lost the masters. 11/9/2019