

## With Words Haiku Reading & Comprehension Course

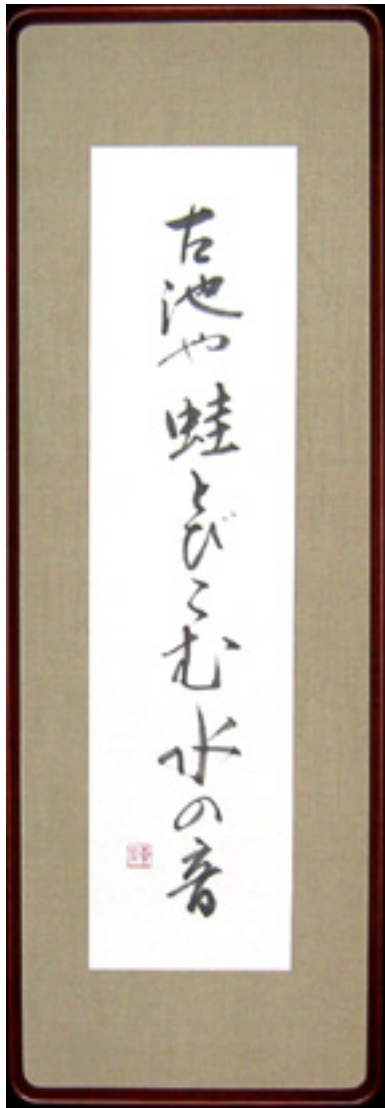
### Lesson One

#### Journey from the Japanese

Haiku itself is a Japanese word, meaning literally 'amusing verse'. Although amusing does not mean laugh-out loud funny in this instance, a haiku should be a few seconds of reading that do indeed amuse you on some level.

The process of importing haiku as a form is still not complete. There is some disagreement over what a haiku is when it's written in the English language. As a reader, it can be helpful to know how far English language haiku has come.

Many descriptions of haiku - even dictionary descriptions - describe haiku as having three lines, composed of 5, 7, and then 5 syllables. Traditional Japanese poems were written as a single vertical line, with seventeen short sound units, which are generally around half the length of our syllables. (English syllables can actually be quite long sounds - think of the word 'through' for example). Paper size and dimensions sometimes broke the line into three parts, which was the origins of the three-line presentation of haiku.



Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694) is the best known haiku poet from history (although it wasn't termed 'haiku' during his lifetime) and the following is his best known poem. Here you can see its evolution from Basho's own hand in script, through to contemporary three-line versions in both English and Japanese.

In Kanji - Chinese script used historically in Japan:

古池や蛙飛び込む水の音

In Hiragana - Japanese script derived from Chinese - count the pictorials!:

ふるいけやかはつとびこむみづの音

In romanised 'Romaji' - count the syllables!:

furu ike ya kawazu tobikomu mizu no oto

Translated by Harry Behn (1898 - 1973):

An old silent pond...  
A frog jumps into the pond,  
splash! Silence again.

Common Japanese presentation of the verse. 'On' are sound units.

古池や 古池や 水の音 5-7-5-on

古池や 5-on

蛙 飛び込む 7-on

水の音 5-on

Translated by William J. Higginson (1938 - 2008):

old pond . . .  
a frog leaps in  
water's sound

You can see that by Higginson's translation, published in the 1980s, the adherence to seventeen "syllables" (and syllables were never a satisfactory equivalent to the much shorter Japanese sound units) has been dropped in favour of brevity and economy of words.

However, the seventeen-syllable format has not been completely abandoned since early translations from the Japanese. In Lesson Four, we'll look at how this has happened.

#### EXERCISE:

Below are some other versions of this famous poem in different styles. From this lesson, pick any two English versions.

1. Do you think the shorter translation you've picked is the more successful in conveying the moment from nature that Bashō is describing?
2. What does the longer translation have to add to the core poem that could be enjoyed by the modern reader?
3. Explain which poem does more for you and why (in a few sentences).

'Dere wasa dis frogg  
Gone jumpa offa da logg  
Now he inna bogg.'

-- Anonymous  
*Translated by George M. Young, Jr.*

Oh thou unrippled pool of quietness  
Upon whose shimmering surface, like the tears  
Of olden days, a small batrachian leaps,  
The while aquatic sounds assail our ears.

*Lindley Williams Hubbell*

Breaking the silence  
Of an ancient pond,  
A frog jumped into water —  
A deep resonance.

*Translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa*

The old green pond is silent; here the hop  
Of a frog plumbs the evening stillness: plop!

*Harold Stewart*

The silent old pond  
a mirror of ancient calm,  
a frog-leaps-in splash.

*Translated by Dion O'Donnol*