

## Essays

### Cultivating *Zoka*

by Janice Doppler

Bashō challenged students to “awaken to the high” — spiritual cultivation and increased awareness of nature and the movement of the cosmos. In *Knapsack Notes*, Bashō encouraged poets to follow the Creative — the dynamic spirit that transforms the natural world and the inner workings of the cosmos. As translated by Steven D. Carter in *Matsuo Bashō Travel Writings*, Bashō said:

"The *waka* of Saigyō, the *renga* of Sōgi, the paintings of Sesshū, the tea of Rikyū — there is one thread that runs through them all. For it is the essence of art to follow the Way of creation, taking the four seasons as a companion. Do that, and what you see will never *not* be a flower; what you ponder will never *not* be the moon. To not see the form before you as a flower is to be like a barbarian; to not have a flower in your mind is to be like the birds and the beasts. So, I say, go out from among the barbarians, separate yourself from the birds and beasts: follow the creative, get back to the creative."

This essay focuses on how to cultivate the Creative, Carter's translation of *zoka*, in your practice as a haiku poet. In *Traces of Dreams*, Haruo Shirane explains that in Bashō's quote above, “the way of art (*fuga*) the way of the inner spirit (*kokoro*) and the way of the cosmos (*zoka*) became inseparable.” Chinese wisdom texts, written during the Axial Age (the same era in which Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle philosophized and Homer penned the *Iliad* and *the Odyssey*), are sources of insight into how to follow *zoka*. *The Book of Changes/Yijing (I Ching)* and *Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)* describe the way of the cosmos. The *Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu)*, by Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, tells stories about how humans relate to and live within the mystery of the cosmos. The *Zhuangzi* sheds light on how to cultivate *zoka* through the way of the spirit and the way of haiku.

My previous essay, *Following Bashō Following Zoka*<sup>2</sup>, defined *zoka* and followed the thread that stretches from Bashō to earlier Japanese scholars who adopted the aesthetic ideals of Chinese poetry to sages who compiled ancient Chinese wisdom texts. The next section touches upon concepts explored in that essay.

### *The Way of the Cosmos (Zoka)*

Ancient sages wrote of a cosmos in which two energies emerged from an undifferentiated void. One fuels the process that continuously shapes and reshapes the *Dao*. The other condenses into the “ten thousand myriad things” — all the living and non-living things in the cosmos. The energies are inseparable, cannot exist without the other, and function simultaneously, yet each retains its own qualities and characteristics. This is a mystery so enormous that it cannot be named; however, to speak of it requires a name, so it is called *Dao (Tao)*, the Way. Following *zoka* is following these invisible energies that animate movement in the universe and the visible transformations that result.

By Bashō’s time, the philosophy of these early wisdom texts had evolved to the Neo-Confucian understanding that framed *zoka* as the Great Ultimate (*tai chi*<sup>3</sup>) represented by the yin/yang symbol that is familiar in modern times. The Great Ultimate

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1 There are two systems for Romanizing Chinese characters. The Wade-Giles system developed by two Englishmen in the mid-nineteenth century and pinyin developed in the twentieth century by the Chinese government. Pinyin is currently in use in China. Either appear in texts. In this article, pinyin is followed by Wade-Giles in parenthesis. For example, Dao and Yijing are pinyin while Tao and I Ching are Wade-Giles.

2 *Following Bashō Following Zoka*, published in *Frogpond* Volume 46:1 in Winter 2021, is available on the Haiku Society of America website.

3 Tai chi in the Great Ultimate refers to a synthesis of yang and yin and not the martial art Tai Chi Fist (*tai chi chuan*) that is commonly referred to as tai chi.

consists of and regulates *qi* (*chi*) which can be energy or matter. The movement of *qi* causes constant motion and change. The resulting movement and rhythms of nature, especially the seasons, yield inspiration for poetry and art.

*Yijing (I Ching)*

*Yijing* uses sixty-four hexagrams to explore the flow of change in the cosmos, the *Dao*. The first hexagram describes the two energies. It is called the Creative by some translators, *zaohua* in Chinese, *zoka* in Japanese, and written 造化 in both. Responsive, the second hexagram, addresses the emergence of physical forms such as mountains, lakes, shrubs, and trees in response to the Creative. The other sixty-two examine every possible phase of change.

Openings of the Creative paired with closings of the Responsive are the source of change in the cosmos. One opening and closing equals a tiny change. As one small action displaces another, over and over, change and transformation unfold.

*Dao De Jing (Tao Te Ching)*

A mystery that cannot be named, but is named? The Creative being the name of two energies yet also used to name one hexagram? It is impossible to explain; however, Laozi hints at it eloquently in the first chapter of *Dao De Jing* as translated by David Hinton:

A Way called *Way* isn't the perennial Way.  
A name that names isn't the perennial name:

the named is mother to the ten thousand things,  
but the unnamed is origin to all heaven and earth.

In perennial Absence you see mystery,  
and in perennial Presence you see appearance.

Though the two are one and the same,  
once they arise, they differ in name.

One and the same they're called *dark-enigma*,  
dark-enigma within dark-enigma.

gateway of all mystery

Rather than translating *zoka* as the Creative and the Responsive, Hinton chose Absence and Presence. In his translations of *Yijing*, *Dao De Jing*, and the *Zhuangzi*, Hinton describes *Dao* as the generative process through which all things rise and pass away. Absence is an energy that shapes and reshapes itself into myriad forms in a process of constant, never-ending change. Presence perpetually rises from and returns to Absence. Presence is the universe we experience. The ten thousand things represent all things in the cosmos that are perpetually emerging, transforming, and returning to the source.

The rhythm of the cosmos, the *Dao*, has been given many names — *zoka*, *zaohua*, the Creative and the Responsive, Absence and Presence, and more. The concept of *zoka* does not exist in English and yet, every poet lives within and is inspired by this transformative energy.

Bashō quoted from, and urged his students to study, the *Zhuangzi*. This text is a random collection of narratives that illustrate how to live within the mysteries of the *Dao*. Two of many themes in the *Zhuangzi* are particularly relevant for cultivating the Creative, cultivating *zoka* within yourself: the inseparability of things and the importance of meditation for cultivating “open mind” or “empty-mind.”

### *The Way of the Spirit*

When I was four years old, someone said “spring is just around the corner” so I went around the corner searching for it. Obviously, spring is not something that can be looked for and found. When spring arrives it is everywhere and everyone breathes it, feels it, smells it, sees its beauty.

Just as we cannot go around the corner to find spring, we cannot set out with intention to find *zoka*. What we can do is cultivate our awareness of the flow of *zoka* by looking outward to cultivate awareness of nature and the flow of the cosmos and looking inward at the creative energy within ourselves, then using it to transform experiences into words.

### *Looking Outward – The Inseparability of Things*

Inseparability of things is grounded in the concept that all things are equal since everything is made of, and driven by, the same *qi*. Zhuangzi said, “Seen in terms of sameness, the ten thousand things are all one. If you understand this, you forget how to love this and hate that.” In one of his stories, monkeys were angry when their trainer said they would get three portions in the morning and four in the evening, but happy when the trainer agreed to provide four in the morning and three in the evening instead.

In another story, two men discuss the human tendency to separate things into categories of good or bad. One comments “Gibbons mate with gibbons. Deer mingle with deer. Mudsuckers carouse with mudsuckers. Humans consider Lady Feather and Deer-Grace the most beautiful of women. But if a fish saw them, they’d head for deep water. If birds saw them, they’d scatter into azure depths. If deer saw them, they’d go bounding away. So of these four, which knows the truth about beauty for all beneath heaven?”

*Looking Inward – Haiku as Meditative Practice*

*Zoka* encompasses everything in the cosmos. Humans live within *zoka* the same as fish live in water. We each embody *zoka*'s impulse to create. You are a bit of the universe experiencing itself. Your process of writing poetry brings something from nothing via the creative power of nature, the *zoka* that permeates you.

Many stories in the *Zhuangzi* illustrate the importance of meditation to cultivate open mind. Not all modern poets meditate; however, writing can be a practice just as meditation is a practice - practice as in a routine that moves toward mastery. A writing practice can be writing to find the light of what is not yet known, a pilgrimage into mystery without knowing where you are going or why, a quest of discovery, a journey of creativity.

Just as meditators learn to clear their minds more and more over time, poets can deepen their haiku practice over time. Consider the *Zhuangzi* story about a man skilled at catching cicadas with a pole. He spent months learning to balance two balls atop one another on a pole. He added a third ball, eventually a fourth. When he was able to balance a stack of five balls on the pole, he could easily capture cicadas. Similarly, the more you practice noticing the rhythm and flow of the cosmos, the more you will open and the more you will notice and the more it will influence your haiku.

*Haiku Mind – Logic Mind*

During a fortnight alone on the coast of Maine, I experienced the impulse to write as a form of hunger that manifested in two ways - observing with the intent to capture every detail or simply noticing what was there without judgement or intent. Journal pages were filled with diagrams and details in the former and proto-haiku in the latter.

I came to think of these as logic mind and haiku mind which Patricia Donegan described as a “way of being in the world with awakened open-hearted awareness.” Both minds are enjoyable, both are valuable, both are aspects of *zoka* since everything is *zoka*. Both are the universe exploring and experiencing itself.

Logic mind seeks knowledge while haiku mind is open to simply experiencing and allowing what comes, to come. It is being in the wonder of it all. Sometimes proto-haiku flow and other times the sense of awe is too overwhelming for just. Haiku mind writing in response to an impulse from the *kokoro* and without intent to capture something is as light and free as a butterfly. You just have to let the words soar.

### *Kokoro*

*Kokoro* has been important in Japanese poetry for more than a thousand years and for long before that in China. The concept, often translated as heart-mind, has no equivalency in English. *Kokoro* in Japanese, *xīn* in Chinese, and 心 in both is a meld of mind, intellect, emotion, feelings, intention, spirit, and soul. It is the poet’s intention, mindfulness, poetic sincerity, and the power of concentration; a consciousness woven within everything in the cosmos; the innermost nature of all things and something that binds all things to each other; and more than all of these.

*Zoka* can be experienced intuitively by the *kokoro* of a poet. There is a moment ... a moment when a skyful of stars, a field of fireflies, or any of the ten thousand things sparks something inside you. The spark is intuited with your *kokoro* - a sense beyond normal senses. The eye sees the scene, the *kokoro* senses the essence. *Kokoro* is a site of feeling, perceiving, and the impulse to write.

According to Hasegawa Kai, one of Japan’s foremost haiku theoreticians, *ma* and *kokoro* are core components of haiku. The poet adds depth and interest by capturing the *kokoro* of the subject of observation - its emotional energy, character, and spirit.

*Ma* is born in the space between two juxtaposed images combined to describe a single world of harmony. The ideal is that a reader notices *ma*, senses the *kokoro* of the poet, and imagines what the poet experienced to complete a haiku.

### *The Way of Haiku*

Human consciousness parallels the interaction between Creative and Responsive – thoughts and emotions arise from the same generative emptiness as the ten thousand things. David Hinton's translation of *zoka* as Absence and Presence includes the concept that the macrocosm is hungry to create and to experience itself. *Zoka* is a creative impulse that can be thought of as that hunger. *Zoka*'s dynamism unfolding within daily life is a source of both raw material and renewable energy for poetry.

### *The Impulse to Write*

If everything in the cosmos is *zoka* then each human carries *zoka*'s impulse to create and ability to generate transformation. Each poet is a microcosm within which everyday experience is the cosmos seeing itself, thinking itself, feeling itself. The impulse to write is an inner hunger to create something from nothing by using words. Written words emerge from consciousness and lived experience. Observing and connecting with nature is a response to the creative impulse, Absence, and each haiku is a bit of Presence created in response to the impulse.

Paying attention to and jotting down what you notice can cultivate a habit of internal awareness. Each jotting is a footprint moving toward something not known before, seen before, smelled before, tasted before. Each can be a stepping stone toward increasingly open imagination. Each captures a flash of change. Most importantly, you change a tiny bit with each thought. Your glimpses beyond the ordinary can create paths in your mind and the paths can become a map toward what you are seeking.



*Awareness of the Movement of the Cosmos*

When Bashō said learn from the pine, he meant go repeatedly to the pine to know the pine. What is important is being in the place you want to know and open to being emotionally moved by what emerges from the pine becoming haiku.

Be there enough and it will speak to you. Spend time, don't just show up, look, and leave. Loiter. Let the place seep in. One day, I sat by the sea watching the tide go down. People would arrive, glance around hoping for seals, but not look long enough to notice the seals basking on rocks fifty yards away, then walk away disappointed. If the mystery is in the flow of the universe you have to spend the time to sense the flow. If you listen, silence will eventually turn to words.

In Zen, meditators watch thoughts rise from and return to consciousness. The *Zhuangzi* frequently alludes to “meditative experience.” Observing, writing, and reading haiku can be meditative experiences. It is up to each poet how. You don't have to try to follow *zoka* or to be *zoka* because you already live within *zoka*. What you can do is become increasingly open to noticing the flow.

There is a forest path on Cape Cod where chickadees, tufted titmice, and nuthatches will take seed from your hand if you stand with your palm outstretched and wait. You cannot make them come. More often than not, birds will land — the tickle of toes, a few soft peeps, the whoosh of wings.

Go into natural places not with the intent to write haiku, but with intent to be open to inspiration — ideally, with a notebook available to record observations before they sink back into their source. Some intent is needed, but it is like the intent of waiting for a bird to land in hand. You cannot force it to come to you. You must make yourself available until it lands in your hand.

### *Kigo*

Ancient sages wrote of what they could understand – particularly the sun, moon, and seasons. Modern western poets can follow their lead. We experience the mysteries in the transformations of the ten thousand things with our *kokoro* and use *kigo* to say, “Hey look at this wondrous thing I have experienced.”

Traditional haiku incorporates *kigo*, season words. For many writers of haiku, *kigo* has been reduced to a nounlike seasonal reference that is an optional literary device; however, *kigo* can be a powerful tool for communicating the creative force of nature, *zoka*. *Kigo* can be the breath and life, the heart-beat and essence of haiku poetry.

Awareness of Japanese notions of *kokoro* and *zoka* can help western poets experience the natural world in previously unexplored ways. Awareness of *kokoro* might spark new facets of your creativity as you plum for images that communicate awe and wonder through *kigo*.

Each haiku can open imaginative space within readers. Each has the potential to spark something in the imagination of a reader. Each haiku is a moment without a past or future, just the moment of observation and the moment of reading. This is a microcosm of Absence burgeoning forth into Presence, the Creative burgeoning forth into the Responsive. Each haiku is a bit of Presence in which Presence and Absence are integrated.

### *Wrapping Up*

Since you are already living within *zoka*, why try to cultivate *zoka*? Ancient artists, monks, and writers sought the edge where daily life and personal identity intersected with mysteries of the flow of change. The best they could do was point at what they saw and it’s the best modern poets can do. If we search where the

ancients pointed, perhaps we can see a little further, especially in light of modern scientific knowledge.

Humans are driven to seek answers to the mysteries of the universe. Perhaps asking questions is actively participating in the flow of *zoka* rather than passively being carried by it. Perhaps the mysteries of each poet following the impulse to create and each haiku being a response to the hunger of the cosmos to see, hear, touch, smell, and taste itself is enough.

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