



Making Poetry

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It seems that poetry has always been associated with the Buddhist teachings, beginning with the verses of Dhammapada, which are attributed to the Buddha himself. In November, we had an opportunity to explore the connection between poetry and practice for ourselves, in a day of poetry and dharma held at the Seattle Insight Meditation Center.

In the morning, we used poetry as a tool for reflection and contemplation. Each of the participants brought one or two poems that they had found meaningful, and during our meditation sessions, we shared them, allowing the words to touch us in silence. Each sitting was followed by a short period of sharing, where we could speak about our response to these poems. The poets whose work we read from was wide-ranging: ancient Zen haiku masters, contemporary favorites such as Mary Oliver and Robert Bly, and some unexpected inclusions such as Emily Dickinson and Tupac Shakur. The themes varied as well, but often touched on the universal qualities of change, loss, and impermanence.

In the afternoon, we shifted our focus to composing our own poems, taking inspiration from the book “Seeds from a Birch Tree: Writing Haiku and the Spiritual Journey” by Clark Strand. Through informal walking meditation, we connected with our outdoor surroundings, and when it felt right, captured our experience of the present moment using the simple form of haiku.

As Strand explains in his book, a haiku is a seventeen-syllable poem divided into three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables. This form is short and uncomplicated, so composing a haiku is something anyone can do. But the haiku also has other special characteristics that give it a dharma connection. First, the haiku should have the quality of a “sketch from life,” a snapshot of the present moment. Its theme typically has some connection with nature, and the haiku generally contains a “season word”, or something in it that invokes a seasonal feeling. This seasonal feeling gives a sense of both the fleetingness of life and the eternal harmony of the cycle of the natural world. Thus, composing a haiku is a practice of mindfulness: recognizing the present moment, seeing its impermanent quality, and accepting it as nature. On the one hand, the haiku is simple, but on the other hand, it can express the most profound truths. Not so different from our meditation practice.

After each walking period, the poems we composed were shared anonymously with the group. This method of composing and reading poems as a group is also part of the tradition of haiku. Sharing our common feelings for the season, the place, and the moments we spent together, we deepened our appreciation for our experience, and also deepened our relationship with each other—a unique and lovely way to develop sangha.

The poems we composed are linked below, so you too can share these fleeting moments from a November afternoon in SODO.

[A Day of Poetry](#)

(The link may take a bit longer to download.)