



THE BUDDHIST SOCIETY

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# 5-7-5 THE HAIKU OF BASHO

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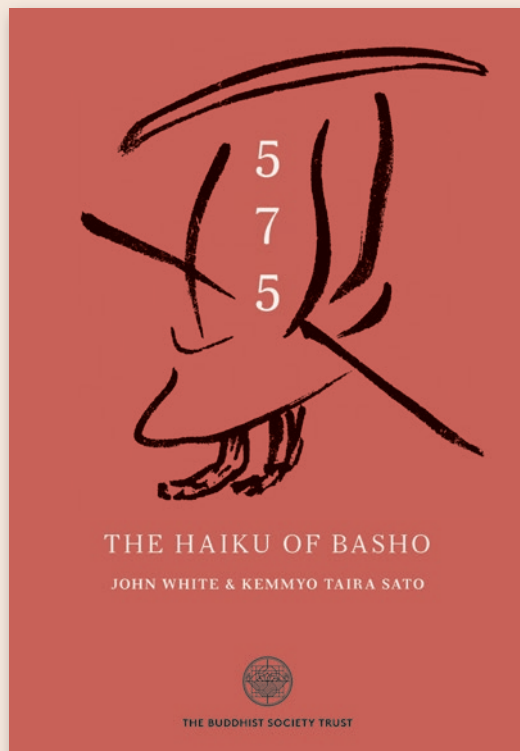
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360 pages, 19 colour illustrations

(paintings & calligraphy)

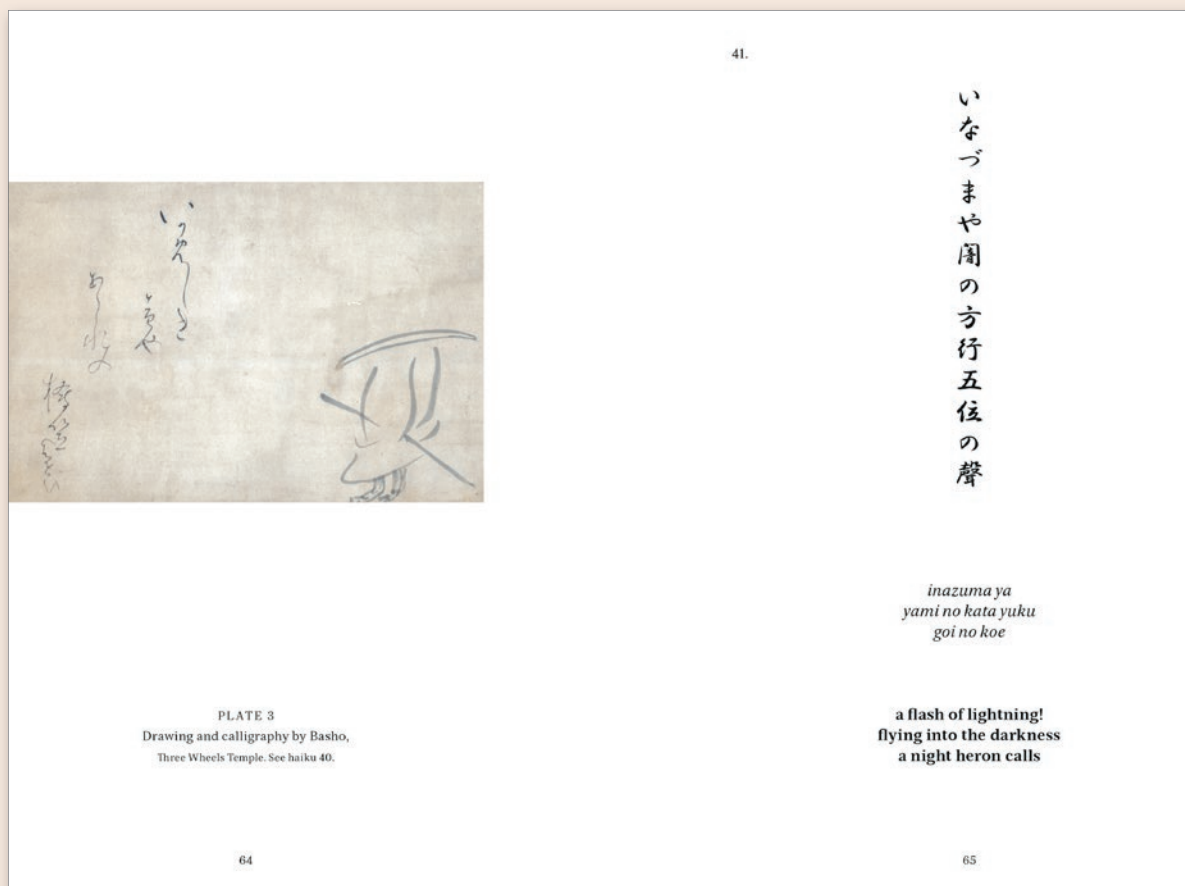
March 2019

**A seminal contribution to the corpus of Bashō translations, being the first collection to present accurate, lyrical English renditions while retaining the 5-7-5 syllabic structure of the original Japanese.**



Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) is widely acknowledged as the greatest of all the Japanese haiku poets. In the original Japanese, the two defining features of the haiku form are its 5–7–5 sound unit format (the syllable being the corresponding unit in English) and its rhythm. The English counterpart of a haiku in Japanese is thus a rhythmic 5–7–5 syllabic structure. Yet oddly enough, in all the major translations of Basho's haiku into English this essential feature is largely ignored and often occurs only sporadically, almost as if by chance. Not the case in this groundbreaking new translation: rhythm remains intrinsic to Basho's art.

This selection of three hundred of Basho's finest haiku represents the first successful strict translation into English haiku of what was actually written, some 350 years ago, by a genius of the form. The renditions are beautiful; the crucial cadences are retained.



## KEY FEATURES

all translations are rendered in 5-7-5 syllables

presents 300 of Basho's finest works

presented in vertical format in Japanese, romanized Japanese, English translation

includes plates of original art and calligraphy

both authors are professors in their fields and recognised as world authorities



PLATE 1  
Drawing by Kyoriku, calligraphy by Basho,  
Toei Central Library. See haiku 1.

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ほろ／＼と山吹ちるか  
滝の音

horo horo to  
yamabuki chiru ka  
taki no oto

yellow rose petals  
gently, gently flutter down;  
waterfall thunder

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## The Metre & Translation

Basho's delight in nature may well be related to the Shinto cultural background in which he was brought up, and later intensified by that deep-seated feeling for the unity of all that is and is not which lies at the very heart of Buddhism. It is thus no surprise that Basho should instinctively have found in haiku the ideal way to express his lifelong love of the natural world, which connects directly to a defining feature of haiku: rhythm. Although Basho himself seldom departed from the norm, he was no pedant, and on one occasion wrote to a disciple that "Even if you have three or four extra sound units ..... you need not worry as long as the verse sounds right. If even one sound unit stagnates in your mouth, give it careful scrutiny". What he was addressing was the overriding importance of rhythmic structure.

Sadly the vast majority of translators have taken Basho's lack of pedantry too much to heart. In virtually all the major English publications of his poetry, it is only occasionally that the 5-7-5 pattern is strictly adhered to, yet to drop the

syllabic content is to lose all hope of finding a counterpart for Basho's fundamental rhythms. Likewise, to turn to a regular four line format, often with 22 to 25 syllables or more, is to lose contact with the very essence and characteristic brevity of Basho's poetry.

This book strictly adheres to the 5-7-5 format, and whenever Basho sees fit to add or subtract a sound unit or two in a given line, the syllabic structure of the resulting English haiku meticulously follows the same pattern. Full account has always to be taken of the fact that Japanese poetry is organised by *mora* (denoting the common short foot) rather than syllable. For example, the addition of a super-scribed macron to a vowel in Japanese (e.g. *chō*) has the effect of making it count as 2 *mora* sound units instead of 1, and therefore of adding another syllable to the line in translation.

## Basho, Nature and Buddhism

Basho's poetry is full of firefly, cherry blossom and moon-viewing, and of the acceptance that such natural entities as spiders, butterflies, cicadas, trees and fleas and flowers, and ourselves, are equals that can constantly converse. In his haiku there is nothing strange in his calling out to butterflies for their companionship or in asking a spider what sort of song it is proposing to sing in the autumn breeze; if he can weep then there can be tears in fishes' eyes as well at spring's departure. In cosmic matters, the moon was never far from Basho and the clear sound of the fulling block, as it beat the cloth carried up to the Great Bear.

With this all-inclusiveness, and his concern for the shortness of the lives of insects and of birds alike, there came an intensified awareness of the impermanence of all created things, a fundamental Buddhist concept. This gives a particular poignancy to such haiku as the two that speak of the cicadas singing on in the sunshine, unaware of the imminence of death at the end of so short a life, or of the bush warbler trilling of its old age amongst the burgeoning shoots of new life in the spring. For Basho, morning glory flowers, Buddhist priests and fish alike were covered by the net of the dharma, as indeed was every living thing.

Awareness of the complexities of his deep-seated religious beliefs can only lead to a more intense feeling for his poetry and a better understanding of his whole approach to nature and to life itself. But Basho was a poet, not a preacher. He took no part in philosophical or doctrinal arguments, though everything he wrote was imbued with his intensely felt Buddhist faith. His way is subtle and profound,

not merely more poetic, and is well illustrated by the haiku at the midpoint of this book which, in the brief compass of seventeen syllables, addresses Emptiness, that fundamental Buddhist belief that nothing, we ourselves included, has a permanent, inherent self.

kozue yori  
adani ochi keru  
semi no kara

out of a treetop  
it was emptiness that fell;  
a cicada shell

### THE HAIKU OF BASHO

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