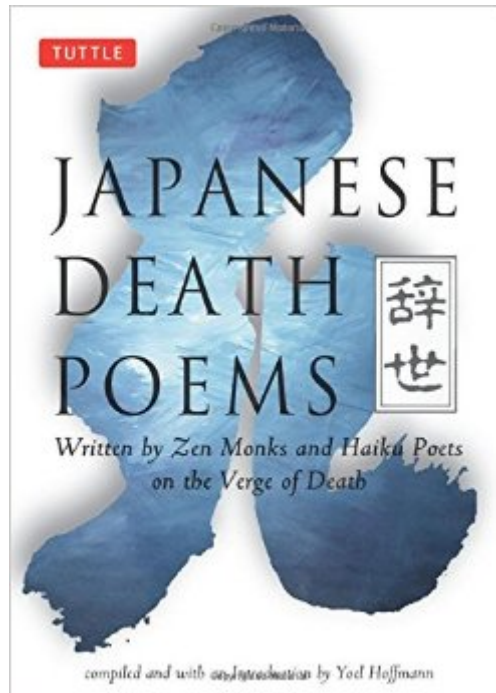


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# Japanese Death Poems: Written By Zen Monks And Haiku Poets On The Verge Of Death



## Synopsis

"A wonderful introduction to the Japanese tradition of jisei, this volume is crammed with exquisite, spontaneous verse and pity, often hilarious, descriptions of the eccentric and committed monks who wrote the poems." — *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*

Although the consciousness of death is, in most cultures, very much a part of life, this is perhaps nowhere more true than in Japan, where the approach of death has given rise to a centuries-old tradition of writing jisei, or the "death poem." Such a poem is often written in the very last moments of the poet's life. Hundreds of Japanese death poems, many with a commentary describing the circumstances of the poet's death, have been translated into English here, the great majority of them for the first time. Yoel Hoffmann explores the attitudes and customs surrounding death in historical and present-day Japan, and gives examples of how these have been reflected in the nation's literature in general. The development of writing jisei is then examined — from the poems of longing of the early nobility and the more "masculine" verses of the samurai to the satirical death poems of later centuries. Zen Buddhist ideas about death are also described as a preface to the collection of Chinese death poems by Zen monks that are also included. Finally, the last section contains three hundred twenty haiku, some of which have never been assembled before, in English translation and romanized in Japanese.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

While I agree that a bilingual text would have been better, this is an excellent selection of poetry written for a particular situation - the death of the author. One strength of the collection is that it is not limited to Zen masters but includes samurai, Shinto followers, women ... The result is a

collection which includes a broad range of emotional flavors - from sassy to hopeful anticipation, from expectations of heaven (pure land) to dissolution ...The organizational principle (alphabetic) results in some curious juxtapositions. The explanatory text is useful, thought-provoking and non-intrusive. The introduction provides excellent background material on death in Japanese culture. Everything works together to create an excellent book.

A superb collection of "last words" in poetry, this volume should be savoured and returned to - repeatedly. It has an impressive range of contributors from various traditions and the variety of expression in the poems compensates in part for the lack of a bilingual text. A book that belongs on poetry bookshelves as well as by the bedside during the thin gauzy hours with faint moonlight casting shadows of doubt...

This is a well-researched book that contains approximately 200 "death" poems, with each averaging 3 lines. The author presents a detailed description of each poem, with a discussion of its cultural significance and the meaning of each line in the poem. For example, the death poem: Clouds drifting off: The sight of Moonlit heavens. In this poem, the reference to clouds refers to the Japanese belief that floating clouds symbolize the life of man. The author of this poem died in August, which is a traditional month of moon viewing in Japan. While the title sounds grim, in Japanese culture death poems are a celebration of death, written by the person who is facing his or her own mortality. Death, in this context, is a transition to another life form (in my opinion). In addition to the poems, the author presents a beautiful discussion of poetry in Japan, and how it relates to their view of death. The book contains poems from Zen monks and famous haiku poets. Another poem that appealed to me as a writer: I write, erase, rewrite, Erase again, and then A poppy blooms. Ron Atkins is the author of two children's books, *Abby and the Bicycle Caper*, and his upcoming (January 2005) *Abby and the Bike Race Mystery*.

As an admirer of this form and of Zen, I am delighted by the selection but not impressed by the commentary. Since Buddhism and Zen both have influenced death poetry so strongly, one would have hoped that the editor would have shown some appreciation of the subtleties of both. Unfortunately, the view of Buddhism is sadly out-dated and fundamentally mistaken. Hoffman misses the essence of emptiness and talks fatuously and anachronistically of "the void". The meaning of death poems written by Zen monks, but also by Japanese poets then becomes distorted by this nihilistic interpretation of Buddhism. So, delight in the poems themselves but skip the

introduction and commentary. For a better collection including some Chinese death poems, see the excellent collection "Penguin Book of Zen Poetry" by Lucien Stryk, Takashi Ikemoto.

An excellent collection of haiku and classical poetry composed in the face of immediate death. Some funny, some wrathful, some incredibly sad. This book is a fine reminder of a time and place where concentration and clarity of mind were considered paramount assets.

This book should be a very good read to you if you are interested in Japanese culture and history. I have not yet finished the book but so far it has kept me wanting to return to its pages. In most cases it explores the lives of various interesting people and then gives you their last written words which you can find your own meaning in, it sets the mood for reflection. It is very refreshing and calming to read.

An odd little book - kind of a Zen Goth collection - that ultimately makes me want to live better and more thoughtfully. Along with the poems are reflections and explanations and some history of the author. This isn't a book that I would read straight through but something to have nearby for frequent foraging. There are pages of great stuff here that will provoke new thoughts and insights.

this book will be one of the favorites of any sort in my collection for quite some time, i'm sure. it's filled with absolutely beautiful poems which range far beyond the gloomy atmosphere many people would expect of them. the beginning portion of the book is written sort of like a textbook, and provides very interesting reading on Japanese literature and history. then it is followed by the death poems of Zen monks, which i find to be the most interesting portion of the book. concluding the book is a long section devoted to the last poems of very numerous haiku poets. this book shines a new light on the subject of death, and is quite well translated.

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