

Essential Haiku and Its  
Subject Matter By Nagata Kôï

by  
Margaret Mitsutani

Exactly what is “essential haiku?” It’s popular to write half-baked essays on the subject these days, mostly among people who are suspicious of the term, and yet assume they’ve grasped the meaning of it anyway. It’s understandable, really, when the ones who brought it up have not yet sufficiently explained the theory behind it. So although I don’t know much about theory myself, as one of the promoters of “essential haiku” I’d like to give my own explanation, as simply and clearly as possible, approaching the subject at my own pace. Of course, by way of explanation I can only offer my own experience as a poet. I hope that those more knowledgeable will back up what I say here.

I. The Essential Spirit

The word “essential” here refers to the philosophical “essence of existence;” in terms of Eastern religion, it is “the Eastern concept of mu (nothingness).” Those who seek an academic understanding of this concept will find the works of Nishida Kitarô and Suzuki Daisetsu helpful, in addition to books such as Kuki Shûzô’s *Man and Existence*, Shimomura Toratarô’s *The Philosophy of Nishida Kitarô*, and Hismatsu Shinichi’s *The Eastern Concept of Mu*. Those with an interest in philosophy and religion will already be familiar with it. Nevertheless, it is a metaphysical concept, and with my poor smattering of knowledge, I can hardly claim to understand it completely myself.

A flower is beautiful, but what is it that makes it a flower? I am undoubtedly I, but what is it that makes me so? When we ask questions like this, the answer brings us to an encounter with “the eastern concept of *mu*.” This is not nonexistence as opposed to existence, but the absolute mu that transcends the opposition of existence and non-existence. That, I believe, is the “essence of existence.” But why, then, do I feel the need to pursue it, and to believe in it?

In the Hannya (Heart) Sutra we find the words, “Matter is emptiness; emptiness is matter.” In my understanding, the word “emptiness” is nothing other than “the Eastern concept of mu,” or in other words “the essence of existence.” It goes without saying that “matter” encompasses everything in the phenomenological world, including flowers and human beings; it is, in other words, a general term for existence itself. Speaking

directly of human beings, first there is the physical body with all its limitations, and the various desires and emotions surrounding it, which give rise to conflict. Every action has its consequence, producing each person's karma. All this falls within the realm of "matter." As long as we are human, it is impossible for us to break away from "matter;" nevertheless, there is a spirit that wants to try. Outside of "matter" lies the realm of "emptiness."

Turning our attention to life itself, we are now, at this very moment, living. But someday, quite suddenly, we will die. F. D. Schubart set down seven cautionary statements, which he calls "the fundamental principles of sincere criticism." The last and most important of these is, "All you nasty, small-minded critics! Don't ever forget that your own end will come." This I learned while reading *The Collected Essays of Dr. Raphael Koeber*. No doubt about it, the end is coming. All human lives are thus limited. And more than any other living being, we are fully aware of this fact. That is why human beings strive to live well within the limited time they have. And yet, speaking only from the phenomenological side, no matter how hard we try, our efforts to live well can only take us so far. In fact, these very efforts can end up restraining us. This is because we keep going back and forth between existence and non-existence. At this point, the desire to live better naturally leads to wisdom. We strive to get out of the world of opposites. This is the wellspring of the religious spirit.

To escape from the world of opposition: this is in no sense a matter of running away from reality. For instance, if we look into the *Shôbôgenzô*, the principle work of the Zen monk Dôgen, we find the words, "Use conflict to cut through conflict." This means that only by adhering single-mindedly to reality can we find the means to transcend it. In other words, the fundamental nature of the religious spirit is extremely active.

This religious spirit that seeks to "live well" inevitably leads us to the realm of "the Eastern concept of *mu*." This realm is both absolute and limitless, an utterly free world without hindrance or reward. It is within the world of opposition, and yet at the same time transcends it. This is the realm that the religious spirit strives to reach, but it is clearly the goal of the artistic spirit as well. A consideration of how fervently the artistic spirit longs for limitlessness should make this perfectly obvious. This is what the Japanese style painter Murakami Kagaku meant when he said, "It is impossible to think of art and religion as two separate things." Kobayashi Kokei once said, "A good painting is one that makes us sense the cosmos, even if it shows only a single persimmon." This one statement is surely enough to make us realize that the artistic spirit is constantly aiming for a sense of limitlessness. And does it not also show, in its purest sense, the ideal of life that unites all human beings, both Eastern and Western, ancient and modern?

In short, the "essential spirit" is the spirit that endlessly pursues the essence of existence (in other words, the essence of life), fervently longing

to break through to that realm where it can find perfect ease, free and unrestricted. It is an Eastern spirit, that we can say is both religious and artistic.

## II. Essential Haiku

The essential spirit is not our special “ism,” nor is it mysticism. Although religion does contain mystical elements, that is not what I am referring to here. Zen, in particular, adheres strictly to the mundane matters of everyday life. When one immerses oneself in daily life, one can even experience the “world of god” that the forerunners of science today—scientists who seek to understand the atom—have already perceived through their research. By closely examining the world of the atom, one can see what it is that makes an atom an atom; likewise, we see in the world of everyday life what it is that makes us ourselves. This “world of god” is nothing other than “the world of Eastern *mu*.” Therefore, the world of Eastern *mu* is not merely a world of abstract concepts, but a world that can be grasped by directly confronting existence itself. It is a world that can only be grasped through the medium of “existence,” within the “world of existence” itself.

“Essential haiku” are haiku written in accordance with the “essential spirit.” They are therefore haiku that take “existence” head-on. And yet such haiku are still merely seeking after the essential, and cannot be said to truly be “essential haiku.” A true “essential haiku” is already completely settled in the purely free “essential realm,” utterly without hindrance, and from that realm reaches back to grasp “existence.” Only then is the form of the poem perfectly free and at ease with itself. However, since ancient times, the number of people who have managed to dwell permanently in this highest realm is extremely small, and the most ordinary folk like us can hope for is to catch an occasional, flickering glimpse of it.

This is why, to my regret, I am forced to include haiku that are still seeking after the essential within the rubric of “essential haiku”:

- (1) Haiku that are moving inevitably in the direction of the “essential spirit.”
- (2) Haiku that, being products of the “essential spirit,” have already reached the “essential realm.”

“Essential haiku” can be divided into these two groups. Speaking in terms of place of existence, the “essential realm” being the goal, the first type of haiku are “moving toward,” while the second type are “coming from.” I think we can say that the majority of poems now referred to as “essential haiku” are “moving toward.” A sense of attachment clings to these “moving toward” poems, while “coming from” poems are utterly free. “Moving toward” poems are somehow cramped, as though the poet is

trying too hard; this comes from the sense of attachment that is the fundamental quality of these poems. Yet in order to reach the state of “coming from,” a poem must first “move toward.” As a “moving toward” poem, it must possess an extremely rigorous will. This will means attachment. Adherence to attachment. And yet from the start, this attachment is the very thing from which we are trying to break free. In order to break free from attachment, we must first intentionally attach ourselves to it: this is the greatest contradiction imaginable. But if we do not first actively engage in attachment, we can never get away from it. This is the plain truth. It is an absolutely unavoidable contradiction. For this reason, in haiku of the first type, traces of the transitional always remain. Their faults are glaring. They are abstract, arbitrary, difficult and obscure, they are self-righteous, and they lack poetic sense.

A Buddhist priest once wrote: “The minds of those who come after are always full of journeys to faraway places. But no matter how far we may go, beyond the clouds or across the sea, as long as we are flesh of this world, we have ordinary needs: food, clothing, and shelter. Yet how great a difference there is between those who are attached to these things and those who are not.” This is exactly right. And we understand it well in our minds. Because we understand it, we must first pursue attachment. We set out to write haiku according to the essential spirit, but if we become too attached to the essential spirit itself, our efforts will end in failure. Only when we have the will to lose our attachment to the essential spirit can we write true essential haiku. At present, “essential haiku” can be seen as the ripened fruit of the process I have just described. I would now like to turn to the problem of subject matter, and through several specific examples, further clarify my argument.

### III. The Subject Matter of the Essential Spirit

At last I am ready to discuss the topic I have been assigned. That topic is “The Subject Matter of the Essential Spirit,” but to tell the truth, I don’t believe that any special subject matter is particularly suited to the essential spirit. The same can be said of any other “spirit.” Accordingly, I believe it would be better to rethink the problem, stating it in terms of “subject matter treated by the eye of the essential spirit,” or rather, “how is subject matter dealt with by the essential spirit?” In other words, method cannot be separated from content. Most simply, “the subject matter of the essential spirit” can be divided into the two following types:

(1) Spiritual content as the essential spirit itself.

(2) Material content as existence (phenomenon) itself.

When we speak of “the subject matter of the essential spirit,” we must imagine a situation in which both types are intermingled. I would now like to give some examples. The haiku I have chosen are either by poets who, at the present time, are clearly leaning toward essential haiku, or those

who, judging from their work, undeniably seem to be doing so.

one straw mound: one strong stick stabs through

*warazukani hitotsuno tsuyoki bossare*

Hirahata Seito

This is a scene (existence) I myself have witnessed. And that is exactly how it was. The expression is strong, with no decoration. This sort of expression (method of treatment) is very much like a Zen *koan*. A *koan* is a “problem” given in the form of the words or actions of an ancient, wise, Zen monk, in order to lead the student to the same state of *satori* (enlightenment) that the monk has already achieved. For instance, a “problem” like “the bridge flows but the water stands still,” which at first glance appears totally absurd, makes it possible to cast off all human attachments (the world of opposition between existence and non-existence)—that sort of problem. Once when a Zen monk was asked, “What is the great principle of Buddhist law?” he answered, “The oak tree in front of the garden.” His answer is used, exactly as it is, as the *koan* (problem) “The oak tree in front of the garden.”

The haiku about the mound of straw has something of the *koan* “The oak tree in front of the garden” in it. It is extremely strong, blunt, clear, and, we should note, also has a sharp quality. The “one strong stick” is reality, and at the same time can be thought of as “one strong essential spirit.” We may well assume that the poet himself is giving us the problem, “Where is the essential place of existence (the straw mound)?” The reader, on the other hand, is struck by a certain power that forces him or her to grapple with this problem head-on. He or she is left standing at the most crucial point. “Did you see through to the essence?” When the reader falls under the power of this query, he feels that the “essence” has immediately been revealed to him. “The answer is in the question,” we sometimes say, and that certainly applies to this poem. What else need one say? The poem is nothing but a leap to its goal. In other words, the mound of straw itself is “existence as a mound of straw,” and as such, tells us everything about its essence. Existence equals essence. Subject matter equals essence.

We should note that the subject of the poem is shown to us just as it is, in its naked form, so to speak. In “essential haiku,” the stronger the “essential spirit,” the greater is the tendency for the subject matter to be stripped naked in this way, for this makes it easier to achieve the poem’s purpose. However, even though this method is in one sense inevitable, there is no reason to assume that all essential haiku must follow it. Here are a few examples to show what I mean:

falling without end the snow: what will it bring?

*kagirinaku furuyuki naniwo motarasuya*

Saitô Sanki

in front and behind are cows: wanting cows to the right and  
left, too

*atosakini ushiari sayuunimo ushihoru*

Hashi Kageo

walking and walking on: a cow is still a cow

*yukedoyukedo ittono shini kotonarazu*

Nagata Kôï

Reading haiku of this type, one after another, they seem, as poems, to show something akin to a state of aphasia. Nevertheless, the strength of the “essential spirit” revealed in them gives us something to watch. The trouble is that they are abstract, and they retain the scar of the “essential spirit”—in other words, the scar of attachment—too clearly. The first poem gives us a glimpse of eternity in the scene of pure white snow, falling forever, but neither of the haiku about cows has any luster or charm; they are arbitrary and dogmatic—almost oppressively so. Although they seek to enter a free world, utterly without hindrance, they end up restraining both poet and reader. And yet at the same time, we definitely see something akin to a koan at work in them. Here we find the rigorous question, “What is the self?” And I believe that this question also appears here as an answer to itself. Yes, the answer is here all right, but without the courage to see through the barrier, it is the kind of answer we might expect from a self-styled Zenist, who considers himself enlightened after a few hours of sitting.

frozen marsh: am I there too? I peer in

*korunumanimo wareutsurerukato nozoku*

Saito Sanki

The writer has appended these notes to the poem: “I was in Nara. The sky, the trees, the marsh were all frozen. My own heart was also frozen. Trembling, I leaned over the edge of the marsh and peered into its icy surface, wondering if I might be reflected there, along with the sky and trees.” The material subjects here are “the frozen marsh” and “I.” But unlike my previous examples, no effort has been made to strip them

naked. “I,” the central subject of the poem, is dealt with adequately as a part of the scenery, “along with the sky and trees.” This “I” is trying to see through to the questions “What is the self?” “What is existence?” But he is merely trying. That is why the poem ends with him wondering as he peers into the marsh. This haiku is stuck in the realm of “moving toward.” The subject matter is dealt with in the spirit of “moving toward.” It is not yet perfectly free and at ease with itself.

meeting a hunter: an umbrella on my shoulder, too

satsuotoai waremo komorikasa katani

Yamaguchi Seishi

Some people say that you don’t have to be Seishi to write a haiku like this, but in my view, even Seishi rarely comes up with a poem this good. Nothing can be done about these differences of opinion, however, for what people see, and how they see it, depends on their position at any given moment. Appreciation is purely a matter of the reader’s spiritual level. Since I have already written of this haiku elsewhere, I won’t repeat myself here, but let me just say that I believe this is precisely the sort of poem that is truly worthy of the name “essential haiku.” The spiritual and material subject matter flow together so completely that it is almost impossible to distinguish between them, and the poem as a whole has reached the realm of perfect transcendence. And when a poem has come this far, nothing more need be said about its subject matter.

Since in all poetry, not just in essential haiku, you must use your subject matter without having it appear to be using you, I’d like to see more poems in which the poet appears to be at the mercy of his or her subject matter, but actually has the upper hand. Be that as it may, in essential haiku, subject matter is treated through the eyes of the essential spirit, but once we enter the essential realm, we can say that the essential spirit is the subject matter. Or in other words, the subject matter itself is the essential spirit itself. This is the realm not of “moving toward” but of “coming from.”

Recently, due to an awareness of the danger of essential haiku to fall into abstraction, there is a tendency toward materialism, and this is perfectly natural. However, we must not let it become mere materialism: it must be a materialism that aims to make its subject matter the essential spirit itself. Only when we penetrate the heart of emptiness can we see that matter is matter.

#### IV. Addendum

To seek for the essence of existence: this is not a new philosophical trend, nor is there anything old-fashioned about it. We find it in the doctrines of

the Kongô-Hannya. Sutra, in Chuang-tzu's conception of chaos, in Goethe's conversations about the essence of phenomena: all of these speak to us of the workings of the essential spirit. Closer to home, in his essay, "A Message for the Tanka Establishment" (1933), Saito Mokichi declares, "We are the ones who concern ourselves with the essential spirit, and by doing so, we get at the heart of life itself." Sadly, in the world of modern haiku, there is little concern for these things, for most of our poets are satisfied to while away their time writing about superficial phenomena. Of course works that approach the essential spirit do appear in our time, almost without the writer's awareness, but only very recently have haiku poets become aware of the essential spirit, and begun to actively seek its inspiration. Even the promoters of "essential haiku" have yet to produce many works that deserve the name.

The essential spirit is a religious spirit. It is a particularly Eastern religious spirit. We Asians cannot escape being Asian. Our modern spirit has sought to absorb as much as possible from the West, so that we can become citizens of the world. This is truly admirable. It is what we haiku poets want for ourselves as well. And yet Asia has its own individual character. I firmly believe that only by living our own Asian individuality to the full can we truly become citizens of the world.

Fortunately, in both tradition and depth of meaning, haiku, this briefest of our poetic forms, is fundamentally connected to the spirit of Zen. I don't believe there is any room for doubt about this. Rooted in everyday life, it is both blunt and sharp, as well as satiric, humorous, suggestive, and symbolic: all of these are Zen-like characteristics. As long as we make sure that these characteristics form the basis of our haiku, they will always be new, both limitless and unchanging.

In closing, I would like to repeat that the essential spirit, as well as being a religious spirit, is the eternal artistic spirit.