

Dōgen's Zen Poetry

The road leading to Eihei-ji Temple is dotted with nine stone monuments inscribed with poems composed by Zen Master Dōgen (1200–1253), the founder of the Sōtō school of Zen Buddhism in Japan. The poems encourage visitors to reflect on the spirit of Zen and incorporate the teachings of Buddhism into their daily lives. Each poem is written in the form of a *waka*, which contains 31 syllables divided into five lines of 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 syllables.

Although he is primarily known as the father of Zen in Japan, Dōgen was an accomplished *waka* poet. In total, 60 of his poems have been recorded in various collections, and his work has influenced many writers who came after him. When acclaimed novelist Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972) received the Nobel Prize in 1968, he opened his acceptance speech with one of Dōgen's most well-known poems:

haru wa hana

natsu hototogisu

aki wa tsuki

fuyu yuki saete

suzushi kari keri

Spring—cherry blossoms

summer—the lesser cuckoo

in autumn—the moon

in winter, a chill descends

the snow freezes crisp and clear

In his speech, Kawabata discussed the plain, almost clichéd quality expressed by this *waka*, which consists of little more than a list of the seasons and their traditional imagery. The plainness of the poem, he says, expresses the very essence of Japan. Unlike most *waka*, the poem is untitled. Its title, “Honrai no Menboku” (“true face” or “true character”), when combined with the poem's plain composition, communicates that Japan's true nature is nothing more or less than this classic seasonal imagery, which is so well-known as to seem a cliché. Rather than searching for obscure interpretations or employing clever wordplay, Dōgen depicts Japan's seasons just as they are already known.

This poem can be found on the poetry stone at the entrance to Eihei-ji Temple.

Much like Zen koan—cryptic or paradoxical questions that are meant to force the mind to “break through” certain stages of thought or understanding—Dōgen’s writing expresses great depth of meaning in very few words. Another of his poems paints a vivid image of winter while also communicating an important message to practitioners of Zen:

fuyukusa mo

mienu yukino no

shirasagi wa

ono ga sugatani

mi o kakushi keri

To a white heron

standing in a snowy field

it is not soon clear

where the white heron’s shape ends

and the withered grass begins

The white heron, an animal that is classically associated with summer, is portrayed here in the depths of winter, having lost all sense of self. It does not know itself from the snow-covered grass. In this same way, Dōgen evokes the ideal state of a Zen monk: immersed in practice, with no separation from the way of Zen.

This poem can be found on a poetry stone in front of Gallery Neiha, a tile-roofed store that sells traditional crafts of the Echizen region (Fukui Prefecture).