Preface

Santoka Taneda is the mendicant Zen priest whose life and poetry are remarkably interesting. His book *Mountain Tasting – Zen Haiku*, traces his journey of begging, walking Zen and salvation through his *sake*, Zen and haiku. Santoka’s life embodies the Zen spirit because his life and poetry were one. He did not mimic anyone and is known for the simplicity of expression in his work.

Akutagawa Ryunosuke, the Father of Japanese short story in his book *Rashomon and Other Stories* presents his finest and most representative work. Akutagawa was a sensitive writer who was a victim of an unsympathetic society and a split culture. His stories portray the anguish of his personal life, and his early suicide at the age of 35 tells about his inner angst with life. With his simple narrations and thought provoking themes, Akutagawa questions the values in human society. His nature as an existential writer of the modern era is brought out in his works which symbolize the Zen paradox.

Chapter I traces the origin of Haiku and Japanese Short Stories. Haiku is a traditional Japanese verse form, notable for its compression and suggestiveness. In three lines, totaling seventeen syllables measuring 5-7-5, a great haiku presents, imagery drawn from intensely careful observation and a web of associated ideas. This requires the readers to have a quiet, still mind to ultimately comprehend the symbolism of Taoist, Buddhist and Zen in the haikus. Haiku poetry has the ability to
evoke powerful emotions within the space of a few short lines. The history of Japanese literature spans a period of almost two millennia. Its history is traced from the ancient period to the modern period.

Chapter II is the Spiritual Odyssey – the journey of understanding about spiritualism, Buddhism, Zen and its philosophy. On his path man tries to find the meaning of spirituality in his life and its relevance in the contemporary world. This spiritual odyssey is to unravel the mysteries that life has to offer and how man searches for it in poetry, prose and various other forms. The essence of Spirituality is the search to know one’s true self, to discover the real nature of consciousness.

Chapter III is about Santoka Taneda and the salvation that he achieved on his walking Zen pilgrimage. Taneda’s first walking pilgrimage through Japan, begging as he went from village to village, began in April 1926. Taneda is said to have walked more than twenty-eight thousand miles, starting out each morning penniless and with no food, and not knowing where he would stay or even if he would find lodging for the night. The record of his various thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and of the myriad sights and sounds he encountered on his walks of self-discovery, will be found in his poems. The poems are characterized by an absolute simplicity, an absolute honesty, a total absence of artifice.

Chapter IV takes into account the wandering monk Santoka Taneda’s book *Mountain Tasting: Zen Haiku*. It studies his recurring theme of nature, sake and his personal observation in his haikus. It tells about the Zen element in his work and how it allures the readers towards his simple yet enigmatic work. The imagery he uses in his haikus is spellbinding and has to be experienced just like spirituality.

Chapter V is about Ryunosuke Akutagawa, the Father of the Japanese short story.
It traces the background of the author, his style and his famous works. It delves deep into Akutagawa’s psyche to understand his inner turmoil and its impact on his work. *Rashomon* the film based on two of his short stories has become symbolic for Akutagawa and Akira Kurosawa.

Chapter VI focuses on the six wonderful stories by the uncontested master Ryunosuke Akutagawa in his book *Rashomon and Other Stories*. The stories narrated in a thought provoking way make the readers sit up and wonder about the conflicting human values and frailties of man. The stories make us realize and grope into to the psychological depth of the human characters painted by Akutagawa. This understanding of human psychology is essential for our survival and will lead us on to the path of our spiritual journey.

Chapter VII is about coming to the ultimate destination, about seeking new horizons beyond the dark, despair filled world. The illuminating haikus of Taneda and the intriguing stories of Akutagawa help us to come to our destination ultimately. From here starts the new journey, seeking new horizons, which will elevate not only the writers, but also all those who can identify with their work.

Chapter VII finally focuses on the summing up of the spiritual quest. It brings forth the relevance of spiritualism and Zen in the contemporary age. Upon introspection, man is bound to realize the importance of spirituality and Zen. Zen does not remove us from life and the world but gives us the insight necessary for us to help in making it better.
As rightly mentioned in Buddhism, our root unease originates in the countless and subtle ways in which we try to evade, by action, thought and emotion, the totally open experience of just how it is and how we are.

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