

The background of the cover is a traditional Japanese ink wash painting (suiboku-ga). It depicts a lotus leaf with a single dew drop resting on its surface. The brushwork is expressive and fluid, capturing the delicate texture of the leaf and the glistening point of the dew. The overall composition is minimalist and evocative, reflecting the Zen aesthetic of the poems.

DEWDROPS
ON A LOTUS LEAF
Zen Poems of Ryōkan

Translated by John Stevens

“Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf is a welcome addition to the growing body of Ryokan’s work available in English.”

—*Tricycle*

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Japanese poet-recluse Ryokan (1758–1831) is one of the most beloved figures of Asian literature, renowned for his beautiful verse, exquisite calligraphy, and eccentric character. Deceptively simple, Ryokan’s poems transcend artifice, presenting spontaneous expressions of pure Zen spirit. Like his contemporary Thoreau, Ryokan celebrates nature and the natural life, but his poems touch the whole range of human experience: joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, enlightenment and illusion, love and loneliness. This collection of translations reflects the full spectrum of Ryokan’s spiritual and poetic vision, including Japanese haiku, longer folk songs, and Chinese-style verse. Fifteen ink paintings by Koshi no Sengai (1895–1958) complement these translations and beautifully depict the spirit of this famous poet.

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John Stevens



SHAMBHALA
Boston & London
2012

Shambhala Publications, Inc.
Horticultural Hall
300 Massachusetts Avenue
Boston, Massachusetts 02115
www.shambhala.com

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Cover art: "Autumn Leaves," by Ryōkan. Ink on decorated paper.
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The Library of Congress catalogues the paperback edition of this book as follows:

Ryōkan, 1775-1831.

[Poems. English. Selections]

Dewdrops on a lotus leaf: Zen poems of Ryōkan/translated and edited by John Stevens.—1st ed.

p. cm.—(Shambhala centaur editions)

eISBN 978-0-8348-2608-3

ISBN 978-1-59030-108-1

ISBN 978-1-57062-261-8 (previous edition)

ISBN 978-0-87773-884-8 (alk. paper) (original paperback)

1. Ryōkan, 1758-1831—Translations into English.

2. Zen poetry, Japanese—Translations into English.

3. Zen poetry, Chinese—Translations into English.

I. Stevens, John, 1947- . II. Title. III. Series.

PL797.6.A28 1993 93-20221

895.6'134—dc20 CIP

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Translator's Introduction

THE ZEN POET Ryōkan was born in 1758 in the remote and snowy province of Echigō, located in northern Honshū, bordering the Sea of Japan. His father was the village headman and a haiku poet of some note, and Ryōkan received a thorough education in the classics of China and Japan. Shy and studious as a boy, Ryōkan was the local Don Juan for a brief period in his youth. Following a spiritual crisis around the age of twenty, however, he renounced his patrimony and entered a Zen monastery.

In 1780 Ryōkan became the disciple of Kokusen, the top Sōtō Zen *rōshi* of the period, and accompanied that master to Entsū-ji in Tamashima. Ryōkan trained diligently at that lovely little monastery until Kokusen's death in 1791. Even though he had received formal sanction as Kokusen's Dharma heir, Ryōkan spurned all invitations to head up his own temple and embarked instead on a long pilgrimage, wandering all over Japan during the next decade.

In his early forties, Ryōkan drifted back to his native place, and he remained there the rest of his days, living quietly in mountain hermitages. He supported himself by begging, sharing his food with birds and beasts, and spent his time doing Zen meditation, gazing at the moon, playing games with the local children and geisha, visiting friends, drinking rice wine with farmers, dancing at festivals, and composing poems brushed in exquisite calligraphy.

A friend wrote this about Ryōkan:

When Ryōkan visits it is as if spring had come on a dark winter's day. His character is pure and he is free of

duplicity and guile. Ryōkan resembles one of the immortals of ancient literature and religion. He radiates warmth and compassion. He never gets angry, and will not listen to criticism of others. Mere contact with him brings out the best in people.

Once a relative of Ryōkan's asked him to speak to his delinquent son. Ryōkan came to visit the family home but did not say a word of admonition to the boy. He stayed the night and prepared to leave the following morning. As the wayward boy was helping tie Ryōkan's straw sandals, he felt a warm drop of water on his shoulder. Glancing up, the boy saw Ryōkan, with eyes full of tears, looking down at him. Ryōkan departed silently, but the boy soon mended his ways.

The samurai lord of the local domain heard of Ryōkan's reputation as a worthy Zen monk and wanted to construct a temple and install Ryōkan as abbot. The lord went to visit the monk at Gogō-an, Ryōkan's hermitage on Mount Kugami, but he was out gathering flowers, and the party waited patiently until Ryōkan returned with a bowl full of fragrant blossoms. The lord made his request, but Ryōkan remained silent. Then he brushed a haiku on a piece of paper and handed it to the lord:

The wind gives me
Enough fallen leaves
To make a fire.

The lord nodded in acknowledgment and returned to his castle.

Once, after the long winter confinement, Ryōkan visited the village barber to have his shaggy head of hair shaved off. The barber cut one side but then demanded a ransom to finish the job: a sample of Ryōkan's calligraphy. Ryōkan brushed the name of a Shintō god, a kind of calligraphy

that served as a goodluck charm. Pleased that he had outwitted the monk, the barber had the calligraphy mounted and displayed it in his alcove.

A visitor remarked to the barber one day, “You know, there is a character missing from the god’s name.”

Such an omission negates the calligraphy’s effect as a talisman, and the barber confronted Ryōkan. Ryōkan scolded him good-naturedly for his greed: “You short-changed me, so I short-changed you. That kind old lady down the road always gives me extra bean cake, so the calligraphy I gave her has an extra character in it!”

Old and infirm, Ryōkan was finally obliged to leave his mountain hut and spent his final days at the home of one of his patrons in the village. Near the end of his life, he fell in love with the beautiful young nun Teishin. She was at Ryōkan’s side when he passed away on January 6, 1831, at age seventy-three.¹

Ryōkan wrote thousands of poems and poem-letters, both Chinese and Japanese style, and scattered them about. These were treasured by the local folk and later lovingly studied and collected by scholars. The first edition of Ryōkan’s poems, titled *Hachisu no Tsuyu* (“Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf”) and compiled by Teishin, appeared in 1835. Expanded collections of Ryōkan’s work have continued to be published over the years, and he is likely Japan’s most popular and beloved Zen poet. As mentioned in the tale above, Ryōkan’s delightful brushwork, totally unaffected and free-flowing, is also highly esteemed, and Ryōkan is venerated as one of the greatest calligraphers of all time in East Asia.

The practice of Zen and the appreciation of Zen art is now universal, and Ryōkan’s life and spirit speak to lovers of poetry, religion, and beauty everywhere. The selection of poems presented here reflects the range and depth of Ryōkan’s Zen vision. He focused on “things deep inside the heart,” and his poems cover the spectrum of human

experience: joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, enlightenment and illusion, love and loneliness, man and nature. Like those of his counterpart Cold Mountain (Hanshan), the legendary Zen poet of T'ang China, Ryōkan's poems reveal the full, rich texture of Zen.

Good friends and excellent teachers—
Stick close to them!
Wealth and power are fleeting dreams
But wise words perfume the world for ages.

1. For a detailed biography of Ryōkan, see John Stevens, *Three Zen Masters: Ikkyū, Hakuin, Ryōkan* (Kodansha, 1993). Other editions of Ryōkan's poems in English translation include: Jacob Fischer, *Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf* (Tokyo: Kenkyūsha, 1954); John Stevens, *One Robe, One Bowl: The Zen Poetry of Ryōkan* (Tokyo: John Weatherhill, 1977); Burton Watson, *Ryōkan: Zen Monk-Poet of Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); and Nobuyuki Yuasa, *The Zen Poems of Ryōkan* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981).

Who says my poems are poems?

My poems are not poems.

When you know that my poems are not poems,

Then we can speak of poetry!

It's a pity, a gentleman in refined retirement composing
poetry:

He models his work on the classic verse of China,
And his poems are elegant, full of fine phrases.

But if you don't write of things deep inside your own heart,
What's the use of churning out so many words?

When I was a lad,
I sauntered about town as a gay blade,
Sporting a cloak of the softest down,
And mounted on a splendid chestnut-colored horse.
During the day, I galloped to the city;
At night, I got drunk on peach blossoms by the river.
I never cared about returning home,
Usually ending up, with a big smile on my face, at a
pleasure pavilion!

Thinking back, I recall my days at Entsū-ji
And the solitary struggle to find the Way.
Carrying firewood reminded me of Layman Hō;
When I polished rice, the Sixth Patriarch came to mind.
I was always first in line to receive the Master's teaching,
And never missed an hour of meditation.
Thirty years have flown by since
I left the green hills and blue sea of that lovely place.
What has become of all my fellow disciples?
And how can I forget the kindness of my beloved teacher?
The tears flow on and on, blending with the swirling
mountain stream.

Layman Hō (Chinese, P'ang) was a Zen master of the T'ang era. One of his famous sayings was "Miraculous power, marvelous activity: drawing water, chopping wood." *The Sixth Patriarch* refers to Enō (Hui-neng, 638-717), who once worked as a rice polisher in a monastery.

Returning to my native village after many years' absence:
Ill, I put up at a country inn and listen to the rain.
One robe, one bowl is all I have.
I light incense and strain to sit in meditation;
All night a steady drizzle outside the dark window—
Inside, poignant memories of these long years of
pilgrimage.

To My Teacher

An old grave hidden away at the foot of a deserted hill,
Overrun with rank weeds growing unchecked year after
year;

There is no one left to tend the tomb,
And only an occasional woodcutter passes by.
Once I was his pupil, a youth with shaggy hair,
Learning deeply from him by the Narrow River.

One morning I set off on my solitary journey
And the years passed between us in silence.
Now I have returned to find him at rest here;
How can I honor his departed spirit?

I pour a dipper of pure water over his tombstone
And offer a silent prayer.

The sun suddenly disappears behind the hill
And I'm enveloped by the roar of the wind in the pines.
I try to pull myself away but cannot;
A flood of tears soaks my sleeves.

In my youth I put aside my studies
And I aspired to be a saint.
Living austerely as a mendicant monk,
I wandered here and there for many springs.
Finally I returned home to settle under a craggy peak.
I live peacefully in a grass hut,
Listening to the birds for music.
Clouds are my best neighbors.
Below, a pure spring where I refresh body and mind;
Above, towering pines and oaks that provide shade and
brushwood.
Free, so free, day after day—
I never want to leave!



Gogō-an, Ryōkan's hermitage deep in the woods of Mount Kugami.

If someone asks
My abode
I reply:
“The east edge of
The Milky Way.”

Like a drifting cloud,
Bound by nothing:
I just let go
Giving myself up
To the whim of the wind.

Torn and tattered, torn and tattered,
Torn and tattered is this life.
Food? I collect it from the roadside.
The shrubs and bushes have long overrun my hut.
Often the moon and I sit together all night,
And more than once I lost myself among wildflowers,
forgetting to return home.
No wonder I finally left the community life:
How could such a crazy monk live in a temple?

Two Poems for My Friend Bōsai

Yes, I'm truly a dunce
Living among trees and plants.
Please don't question me about illusion and enlightenment

—
This old fellow just likes to smile to himself.
I wade across streams with bony legs,
And carry a bag about in fine spring weather.
That's my life,
And the world owes me nothing.

The gaudy beauty of this world has no attraction for me—
My closest friends are mountains and rivers,
Clouds swallow up my shadow as I walk along,
When I sit on cliffs, birds soar overhead.
Wearing snowy straw sandals, I visit cold villages.
Go as deep as you can into life,
And you will be able to let go of even blossoms.

Kameda Bōsai (1752-1826), a famous scholar, artist, and poet of the Edō Period, visited Ryōkan in Echigō.

A single path among ten thousand trees,
A misty valley hidden among a thousand peaks.
Not yet autumn but already leaves are falling;
Not much rain but still the rocks grow dark.
With my basket I hunt for mushrooms;
With my bucket I draw pure spring water.
Unless you got lost on purpose
You would never get this far.

I climb to Great Compassion Hall
And gaze out at the clouds and haze.
Ancient trees stretch toward the sky,
A fresh breeze whispers of ten thousand generations.
Below, Dragon King Spring—
So pure you can see right to its source.
To passersby I shout,
“Come and see yourself mirrored in the water!”

In the stillness by the empty window
I sit in formal meditation wearing my monk's surplice.
Navel and nose in alignment,
Ears parallel with the shoulders.
Moonlight floods the room;
The rain stops but the eaves drip and drip.
Perfect this moment—
In the vast emptiness, my understanding deepens.



“Dwell/high above the clouds/and you, too,/will gaze eternally/on the
bright moon.”

At night, deep in the mountains,
I sit in meditation.
The affairs of men never reach here:
Everything is quiet and empty,
All the incense has been swallowed up by the endless night.
My robe has become a garment of dew.
Unable to sleep, I walk out into the woods—
Suddenly, above the highest peak, the full moon appears.

In my hermitage a volume of *Cold Mountain Poems*—
It is better than any sutra.
I copy his verses and post them all around,
Savoring each one, over and over.

When all thoughts
Are exhausted
I slip into the woods
And gather
A pile of shepherd's purse.

Like the little stream
Making its way
Through the mossy crevices
I, too, quietly
Turn clear and transparent.

Orchid

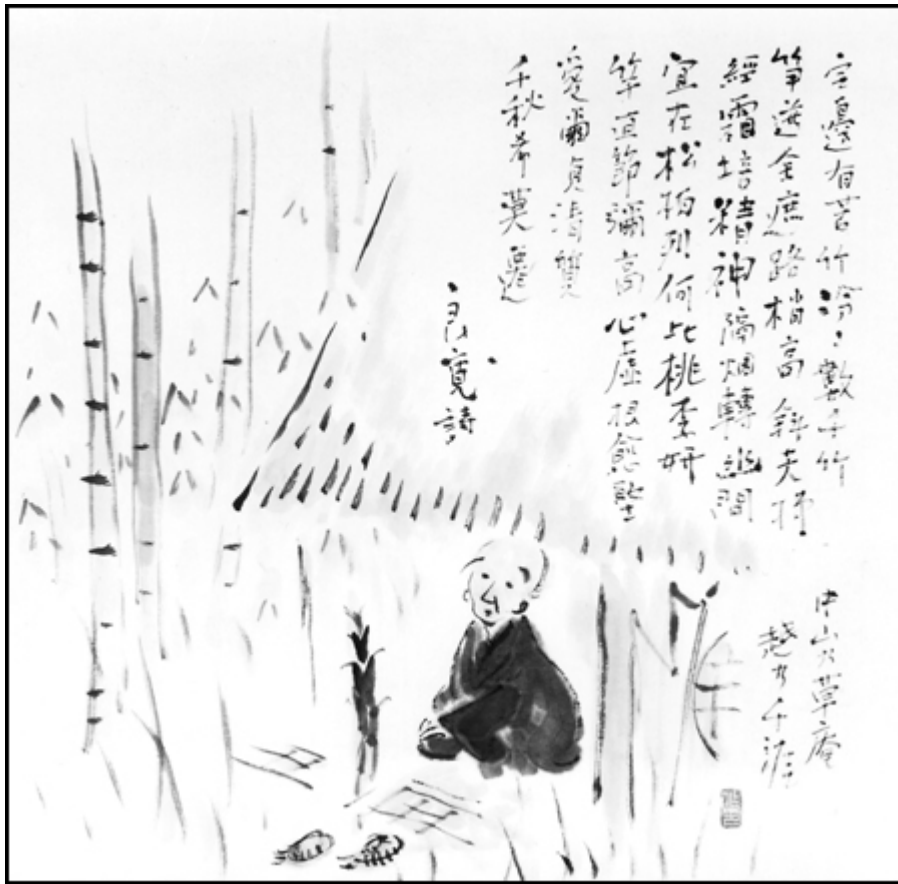
Deep in the valley, a beauty hides:
Serene, peerless, incomparably sweet.
In the still shade of the bamboo thicket
It seems to sigh softly for a lover.

The Lotus

First blooming in the Western Paradise,
The lotus has delighted us for ages.
Its white petals are covered with dew,
Its jade green leaves spread out over the pond,
And its pure fragrance perfumes the wind.
Cool and majestic, it rises from the murky water.
The sun sets behind the mountains
But I remain in the darkness, too captivated to leave.

Bamboo

The thick bamboo grove near my hut
Keeps me nice and cool.
Shoots proliferate, blocking the path,
While old branches reach for the sky.
Years of frost give bamboo spirit;
They are most mysterious when wrapped in mist.
Bamboo is as hardy as pine and oak,
And more subtle than peach or plum blossoms.
It grows straight and tall,
Empty inside but with a sturdy root.
I love the purity and honesty of my bamboo,
And want them to thrive here always!



Bamboo. The inscription is the poem translated on the preceding page.

Wild peonies
Now at their peak
In glorious full bloom:
Too precious to pick,
Too precious not to pick.

O lonely pine!
I'd gladly give you
My straw hat and
Thatched coat
To ward off the rain.

In my garden
I raised bush clover,
suzuki grass,
violets, dandelions,
flowery silk trees,
banana plants, morning glories,
boneset, asters,
spiderwort, daylilies:
Morning and evening,
Cherishing them all,
Watering, nourishing,
Protecting them from the sun.
Everyone said my plants
Were at their best.
But on the twenty-fifth of May,
At sunset,
A violent wind
Howled madly,
Battering and rending my plants;
Rain poured down,
Pounding the vines and flowers
Into the earth.
It was so painful
But as the work of the wind
I have to let it be . . .

The plants and flowers
I raised about my hut
I now surrender
To the will
Of the wind.

The flower invites the butterfly with no-mind;
The butterfly visits the flower with no-mind.
The flower opens, the butterfly comes;
The butterfly comes, the flower opens.
I don't know others,
Others don't know me.
By not-knowing we follow nature's course.

My hermitage is home to a cat and a mouse;
Both are furry creatures.
The cat is fat and sleeps in broad daylight;
The mouse is thin and scampers about in the dark.
The cat is blessed with talent,
Able to deftly catch living things for its meals.
The mouse is cursed,
Limited to sneaking bits and pieces of food.
A mouse can damage containers, it is true,
But containers can be replaced,
Not so living things.
If you ask me which creature incurs more sin,
I'd say the cat!

My daily fare: playing with the village children.
I've always got a few cloth balls tucked in my sleeves:
Not good for much else,
I do know how to enjoy the tranquillity of spring!

This cloth ball in my sleeve is more valuable than a
thousand pieces of gold;
I'm quite skillful at ball playing, you know.
If someone wants to learn my secret, here it is:
"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven!"



Cloth ball. The inscription is the second poem translated on the preceding page.

What is this life of mine?

Rambling on, I entrust myself to fate.

Sometimes laughter, sometimes tears.

Neither a layman nor a monk.

An early spring rain drizzles on and on.

But the plum blossoms have yet to brighten things up.

All morning I sit by the hearth,

No one to talk to.

I search for my copybook

And then brush a few poems.

A Visit to Mr. Fuji's Villa

It's several miles outside the town
And I walked there together with a woodsman
Along a meandering footpath through rows of verdant
pines.
In the valley around us, sweet-smelling wild plum blossoms.
Every time I visit, I gain something new,
And there I feel truly at ease.
The fish in his pond are big as dragons,
And the surrounding forest is still the day long.
The inside of his home is full of treasures:
Volumes of books scattered about!
Inspired, I loosen my robe, browse through the books,
And then compose my own verse.
At twilight I walk along the eastern corridor
Where I'm greeted again by a little flock of spring birds.

Summer Evening

The night advances toward dawn,
Dew drips from the bamboo onto my brushwood gate.
My neighbor to the west has stopped pounding his mortar;
My little hermit's garden grows moist.
Frogs croak near and far,
Fireflies flit high and low.
Wide awake, it's not possible to sleep tonight.
I smooth my pillow and let my thoughts drift.

Visiting Cloud Peak with Priest Tenge in Fall

Human existence in this world:
Duckweed cast adrift on the water.
Who can ever feel secure?
That is the reason
I took up a monk's staff, left my parents,
And bade farewell to my friends.
A single patched robe
And one bowl have sustained me all these years.
I'm fond of this little hut
And often spend time here—
We are two kindred spirits,
Never worrying about who is guest or host.
The wind blows through lofty pines,
Frost chills the few mums that remain.
Arm in arm we stand above the clouds;
Bound as one, roaming in the far beyond.

At dusk
I often climb
To the peak of Kugami.
Deer bellow,
Their voices
Soaked up by
Piles of maple leaves
Lying undisturbed at
The foot of the mountain.

The Autumn Moon

The moon appears in every season, it is true,
But surely it's best in fall.
In autumn, mountains loom and water runs clear.
A brilliant disk floats across the infinite sky,
And there is no sense of light and darkness,
For everything is permeated with its presence.
The boundless sky above, the autumn chill on my face.
I take my precious staff and wander about the hills.
Not a speck of the world's dust anywhere,
Just the brilliant beams of moonlight.
I hope others, too, are gazing on this moon tonight,
And that it's illuminating all kinds of people.
Autumn after autumn, the moonlight comes and goes;
Human beings will gaze upon it for eternity.
The sermons of Buddha, the preaching of Enō,
Surely occurred under the same kind of moon.
I contemplate the moon through the night,
As the stream settles, and white dew descends.
Which wayfarer will bask in the moonlight longest?
Whose home will drink up the most moonbeams?



“On Mount Kugami,/in the shadow/of the pines,/the moon manifests
itself/so clear and bright!”

Shut up among the solitary peaks,
I sadly contemplate the driving sleet outside.
A monkey's cry echoes through the dark hills,
A frigid stream murmurs below,
And the light by the window looks frozen solid.
My inkstone, too, is ice-cold.
No sleep tonight, I'll write poems,
Warming the brush with my breath.

On a bitterly cold November night
The snow fell thick and fast—
First like hard grains of salt,
Then more like soft willow buds.
The flakes settled quietly on the bamboo
And piled up pleasingly on the pine branches.
Rather than turning to old texts, the darkness
Makes me feel like composing my own verse.

This world:
A fading
Mountain echo,
Void and
Unreal.

Within
A light snow
Three Thousand Realms;
Within those realms
Light snow falls.

As the snow
Engulfs my hut
At dusk
My heart, too,
Is completely consumed.

Blending with the wind,
Snow falls;
Blending with the snow,
The wind blows.
By the hearth
I stretch out my legs,
Idling my time away
Confined in this hut.
Counting the days,
I find that February, too,
Has come and gone
Like a dream.

An easterly wind brought needed rain
That poured over the thatched roof all night
While this hermit dozed peacefully,
Untroubled by the floating world's agitation.
Green mountains bathe in the sunrise,
Spring birds twitter in the branches.
Aimlessly, I stroll out the gate—
Riverlets flow toward distant villages,
Lovely flowers decorate the slopes.
I spot an old farmer leading an ox
And a youngster carrying a hoe.
Human beings must work in all seasons, sunrise to sunset.
I'm the only one with nothing to do,
Sticking close to my native place.



“The wind gives me/enough fallen leaves/to make a fire.”

Haiku

I must go there today—
Tomorrow the plum blossoms
Will scatter.

A nightingale's song
Brings me out of a dream:
The morning glows.

A single wish:
To sleep one night
Beneath the cherry blossoms.

The mountain village:
Swallowed up by
A chorus of croaking frogs!

Autumn's first drizzle:
How delightful,
The nameless mountain.

Left behind by the thief—
The moon
In the window.

Around my shuttered door,
Fallen pine needles:
How lonely I feel . . .

Calling out to me
As they return home:
Wild geese at night.

This old body of mine:
A bamboo buried
In the cold snow.

Buddhist Begging

Early on the first of August
I take my bowl and head for town.
Silver clouds accompany my steps,
A golden breeze caresses the bell on my staff.
Ten thousand doors, a thousand gates open for me.
I feast my eyes on cool groves of bamboo and banana trees.
I beg here and there, east and west,
Stopping at sake shops and fishmongers, too.
An honest gaze can disarm a mountain of swords;
A steady stride can glide over the fires of hell.
This was the message the Prince of Beggars
Taught to his top disciples over twenty-seven hundred
years ago,
And I still act as one of Buddha's descendants.
A wise old fellow once said,
"Regarding food, all is equal in the Buddha's Law."
Keep those words in mind
No matter how many aeons may pass.

For our sakes
The clams and fish
Give themselves
Unselfishly
As food.

In my little begging bowl
Violets and dandelions,
Mixed together
As an offering to the
Buddhas of the Three Worlds.

Picking violets
By the roadside
I absent-mindedly
Left my little bowl behind—
O poor little bowl!

I've forgotten my
Little begging bowl again—
No one will take you,
Surely no one will take you:
My sad little bowl!

Spring rains,
Summer showers,
A dry autumn:
May nature smile on us
And we all will share in the bounty.

Please don't mistake me
For a bird
When I swoop
Into your garden
To eat the cherry apples.

I went there
To beg rice
But the blooming bush clover
Among the stones
Made me forget the reason.

Along the hedge a few branches of golden mums;
Winter crows soar above the thick woods.
A thousand peaks glow brilliantly in the sunset,
And this monk returns home with a full bowl.

No luck today on my mendicant rounds;
From village to village I dragged myself.
At sunset I find myself with miles of mountains between me
and my hut.
The wind tears at my frail body,
And my little bowl looks so forlorn—
Yet this is my chosen path that guides me
Through disappointment and pain, cold and hunger.



“Today, on my begging rounds, I met a big storm . . .”

After gathering firewood in the mountains
I returned to my hut
And found pickled plums and potatoes
Left beneath my window by a visitor.
The plums were wrapped in paper,
The potatoes in green grass,
And a scrap of paper bore the donor's name.
Deep in the mountains the food is tasteless—
Mostly turnips and greens—
So I quickly boiled the treat with soya paste and salt.
I filled my usually empty stomach
With three big bowls.
If my poet friend had left some rice wine
It would have been a real banquet.
I savored about a fifth of the gift and stored the rest;
Patting my full belly, I went back to my chores.
Buddha's Enlightenment Day will be here in six days
And I did not know what to offer
But now I have become rich—
Buddha will feast on plums and delicious potato gruel.

A Gift of Seven Pomegranates

Splitting them,
Picking them apart,
Breaking them in two:
Eating, eating, eating—
Not letting them out of my mouth!

Two Poem-Letters

The weather is good and
I have many visitors
But little food.
Any pickled plums
To spare?

It has grown chill
And the firefly
Glow no longer:
Will some kind soul
Send me golden water?

“Firefly” was one of Ryōkan’s nicknames. “Golden water” is rice wine.

My Cracked Wooden Bowl

This treasure was discovered in a bamboo thicket—
I washed the bowl in a spring and then mended it.
After morning meditation, I take my gruel in it;
At night, it serves me soup or rice.
Cracked, worn, weather-beaten, and misshapen
But still of noble stock!

To My New Vase

From now on
You'll never be bothered
By even a speck of dust;
Day and night in my care
You'll never be lonely!

Noisy crickets now own the harvested fields;
Bundles of smoldering rice straw fill the plain with haze.
Farmers sit by their hearths enjoying the long evenings,
Weaving mats and preparing for spring.
When farm families gather and talk
The words “false” and “true” are never uttered.
City folk aren’t that lucky—
Those poor souls must bow and scrape all day.

The year will be over soon,
But I'm still here in my little hut.
Cold autumn rain falls sadly,
And leaves pile up on the temple steps.
I pass time absent-mindedly reading sutras
And chanting some old poems.
Suddenly a child appears and says,
"Come, let's go to the village together."

Poems Exchanged between Ryōkan and His Brother Yoshiyuki

"I hear you play marbles with the brothel girls."

The black robed monk
Sports with
Pleasure girls—
What can be
In his heart?

—from YOSHIYUKI

Sporting and sporting,
As I pass through this floating world:
Finding myself here,
Is it not good
To dispel the bad dreams of others?

—RYŌKAN

Sporting and sporting
While passing through this world
Is good, perhaps,
But don't you think of
The world to come?

—YOSHIYUKI

It is in this world,
With this body
That I sport:
No need to think
About the world to come.

—RYŌKAN

Midsummer—

I walk about with my staff.
Old farmers spot me
And call me over for a drink.
We sit in the fields
Using leaves for plates.
Pleasantly drunk and so happy
I drift off peacefully
Sprawled out on a paddy bank.

What luck! I found a coin in my bag!
Now I can call on my friend nicknamed the Sleeping
Dragon.
I've wanted to drink with him for ages
But lacked the means until now.

For Keizan, Abbot of Ganjō-ji

Ganjō-ji is west of Hokke-dō, a temple
Secluded among rocks and hidden by thick mist.
In the deep valley, moss grows rampant and visitors are
rarely seen.
Fishes dance in an ancient pond,
Tall pines reach toward the blue sky,
And between the trees a glimpse of Mount Yahiko.
One bright September day, on my begging rounds,
I impulsively decided to knock on the temple gate.
I'm a free-spirited Zen vagrant,
And the abbot, too, has lots of time to spare.
We stayed together all day, not a care in the world,
Sipping wine, toasting the mountains, and laughing
ourselves silly!

Enjoying Rice Wine with My Younger Brother Yoshiyuki

Older and younger brother together again,
But now both of us have bushy white eyebrows.
It's a time of peace and happiness in the world,
And day after day we get drunk as fools!

In this world
If there were one
Of a like mind—
We could spend the night
Talking in my little hut!



The inscription is the second poem translated on the following page.

How can I possibly sleep
This moonlit evening?
Come, my friends,
Let's sing and dance
All night long.

Stretched out,
Topsy,
Under the vast sky:
Splendid dreams
Beneath the cherry blossoms.

Wild roses,
Plucked from fields,
Full of croaking frogs:
Float them in your wine
And enjoy every minute!

Late at night I draw my inkstone close;
Flushed with wine, I put my worn brush to paper.
I want my brushwork to bear the same fragrance as plum
blossoms,
And even though old I will try harder than anyone.

Li Po

After a promenade in the green fields, accompanied by a
spring wind,
Li Po naps peacefully by his desk.
My host asked to inscribe a painting of the poet—
That's easy since I love wine as much as Li Po did!

Tu Fu

Enchanted by blossoms, beguiled by willows, Tu Fu hid
out in a deep valley.
Mounted on a horse, he roamed about, gloriously drunk.
In his dreams, he found himself back at court,
Dashing off poems for the emperor's edification.

Brush and Inkstone

How is my karma related to the brush and inkstone?
Over and over I write and write.
The only one who really knows the reason
Is the Great Hero Buddha.

Li Po (701-762) and Tu Fu (712-770) were the two greatest poets of T'ang China.

The districts of Echigō are full of beauties,
And today a group of lovelies sport along a river greener
than brocade.
Hair finely dressed with white jade hairpins;
Delicate hands revealing just a glimpse of scarlet
undergowns.
The maidens braid grass into garlands as gifts for young
lords,
And gather branches of flowers as they flirt with passersby.
Yet this charming coquetry is melancholy somehow,
For it won't outlast their songs and laughter.

The courtesans are turned out in their best—
How delightfully they speak and laugh
Along the lovely green river.
They call out to gentlemen the day long
And tempt them with songs that charm the hardest heart.
They mince about with flirtatious glances so difficult to
resist.
Someday, though, even these captivating women will have
nothing left,
And they will be left out in the harsh cold.

Spring sunset, a willowy miss of sixteen
Returns home with an armful of mountain blossoms.
A drizzle caresses her flowers.
She turns heads as she goes by,
Her kimono held up with a slight hitch.
People ask each other:
“Whose daughter is that?”

Long ago, a pretty girl lived next door:
She used to pick mulberries in a distant grove,
Returning with her white arms full of
Gold and silver branches.
She sang with a heart-rending voice
And sparkled with life.
Young farmers put aside their hoes when they saw her,
And many forgot to return home when she was around.
Now she is just a white-haired granny,
Burdened with the aches and pains of old age.



Ryōkan with two village children.

Poem Composed Following a Terrible Earthquake

Day after day after day,
At noon and midnight, the cold was piercing.
The sky was thick with black clouds that blocked out the sun.
Fierce winds howled, snow swirled violently.
Wild waves stormed heaven, buffeting monster fish.
Walls trembled and shook, people shrieked in terror.
Looking back at the past forty years,
I now see that things were racing out of control:
People had grown lax and indifferent,
Forming factions and fighting among themselves.
They forgot about obligations and duty,
Ignored notions of loyalty and justice,
And only thought of themselves.
Full of self-conceit, they cheated each other,
Creating an endless, filthy mess.
The world was rife with madness,
No one shared my concern.
Things got worse until the final disaster struck—
Few were aware that the world was star-crossed
And dreadfully out of kilter.
If you really want to understand this tragedy, look deep
inside
Rather than helplessly bemoan your cruel fate.

Leave off your mad rush for gold and jewels—
I've got something far more precious for you:
A bright pearl that sparkles more brilliantly than the sun
and moon
And illuminates each and every eye.
Lose it and you'll wallow in a sea of pain;
Find it and you'll safely reach the other shore.
I'd freely present this treasure to anyone
But hardly anyone asks for it.

For Hachisuke, an Untouchable

Gold and silver, status and power, all return to heaven and earth.

Profit and loss, having and lacking, are all essentially empty.

Aristocrats and peasants, saints and sinners, end up the same.

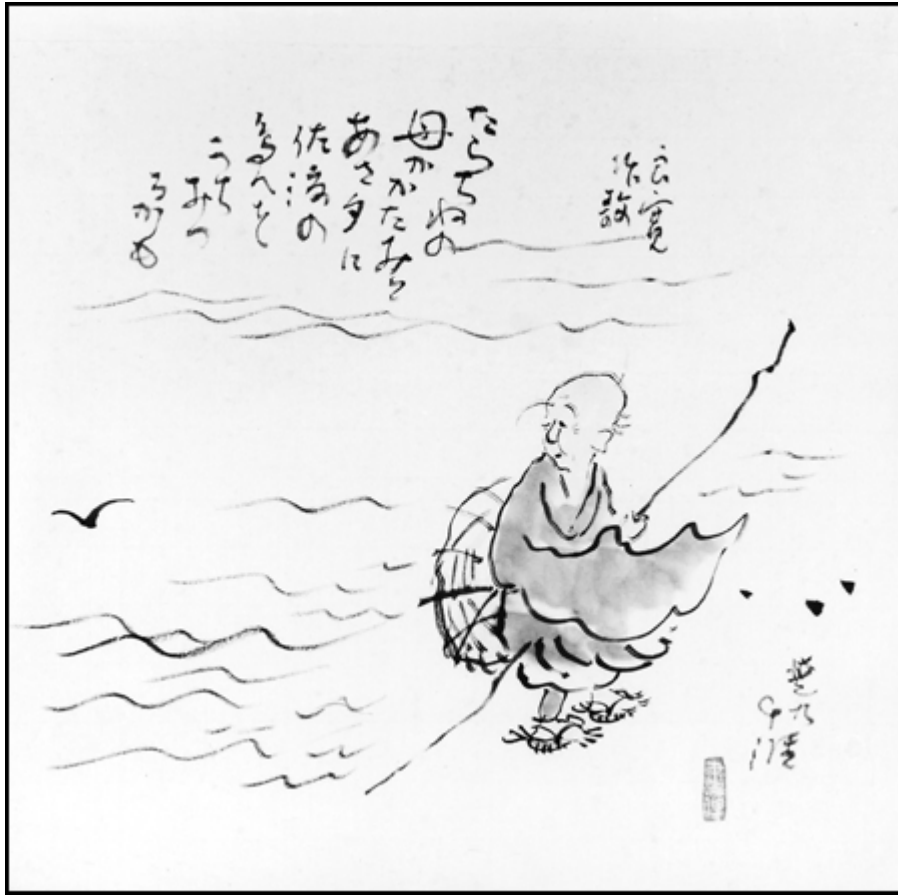
We are bound by fate to the whirl of existence.

How lamentable, the Beggar of Ryōgoku Bridge

Who perished in a dreadful flood.

If you ask me his whereabouts, I'll reply:

“In the heart of the moon's reflection on the waves!”



“In my dreams/mother’s form appears/morning and night/in the distant mist/surrounding Sadō Island.”

Time passes,
There is no way
We can hold it back—
Why, then, do thoughts linger on,
Long after everything else is gone?

For Children Killed in a Smallpox Epidemic

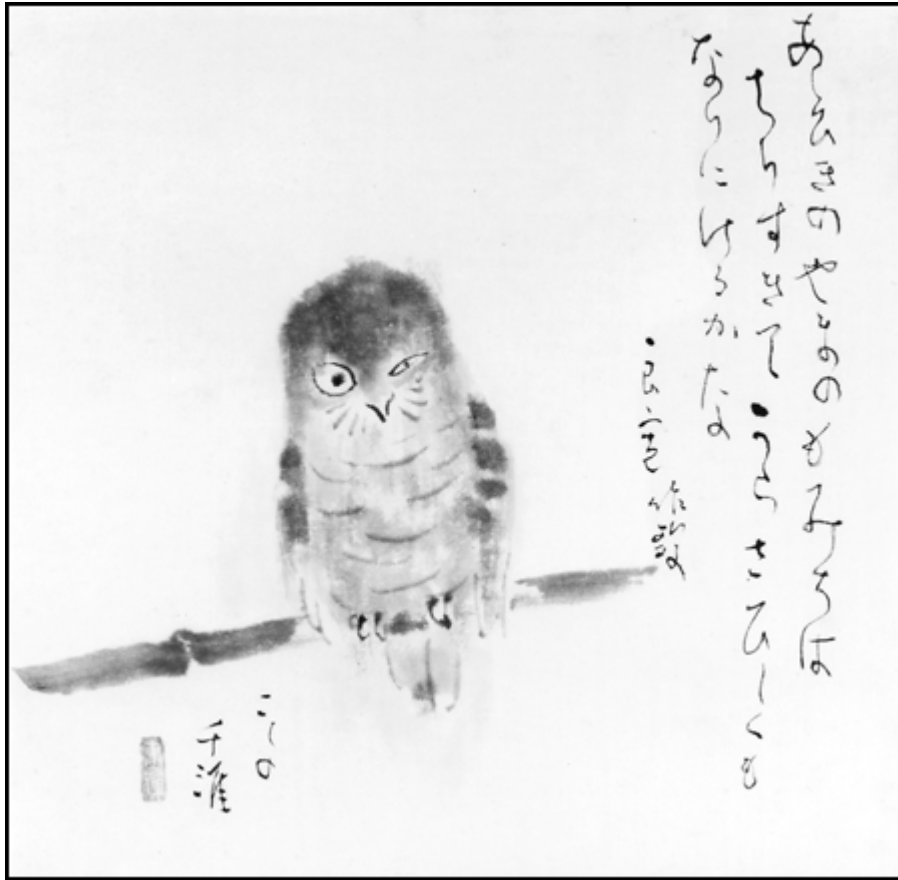
When spring arrives
From every tree tip
Flowers will bloom,
But those children
Who fell with last autumn's leaves
Will never return.

Keep your heart clear and transparent
And you will never be bound.
A single disturbed thought, though,
Creates ten thousand distractions.
Let myriad things captivate you
And you'll go further and further astray.
How painful to see people
All wrapped up in themselves.

I watch people in the world
Throw away their lives lusting after things,
Never able to satisfy their desires,
Falling into deep despair
And torturing themselves.
Even if they get what they want
How long will they be able to enjoy it?
For one heavenly pleasure
They suffer ten torments of hell,
Binding themselves more firmly to the grindstone.
Such people are like monkeys
Frantically grasping for the moon in the water
And then falling into a whirlpool.
How endlessly those caught up in the floating world suffer.
Despite myself, I fret over them all night
And cannot staunch my flow of tears.

Sometimes I sit quietly,
Listening to the sound of falling leaves.
Peaceful indeed is the life of a monk,
Cut off from all worldly matters.
Then why do I shed these tears?

I'm so aware
That it's all unreal:
One by one, the things
Of this world pass on.
But why do I still grieve?



“When the/autumn leaves fall,/does this fellow,/too,/feel lonely?”

When I think
About the misery
Of those in this world
Their sadness
Becomes mine.

Oh, that my monk's robe
Were wide enough
To gather up all
The suffering people
In this floating world.

Nothing makes me
More happy than
Amida Buddha's Vow
To save
Everyone.

If you are not put off
By the voice of the valley
And the starry peaks,
Why not walk through the shady cedars
And come see me?

At dusk
Come to my hut—
The crickets will
Serenade you, and I will
Introduce you to the moonlit woods.

To a Visitor

Listen to the cicadas in treetops near the waterfall;
See how last night's rains have washed away all grime.
Needless to say, my hut is as empty as can be,
But I can offer you a window full of the most intoxicating
air!

For My Visitors

Deep in the woods,
Holed up for the winter
An old fellow like me—
Who will be the first to visit?
I knew it would be you!

During a lull in the rain
I picked some
Wild parsley
For you to enjoy
During your visit.

How heartless
For the snowflakes
Not to fall
On the day
Of your esteemed visit.

Wait for moonlight
Before you go—
The mountain trail
Is thick with
Chestnut burrs!

Reply to a Friend's Letter

Your smoky village is not so far from here
But icy rain kept me captive all morning.
Just yesterday, it seems, we passed an evening together
 discussing poetry
But it's really been twenty windblown days.
I've begun to copy the text you lent me,
Fretting how weak I've become.
This letter seals my promise to take my staff
And make my way through the steep cliffs
As soon as the sun melts the ice along the mossy path.

My Precepts

Take care not to:

talk too much

talk too fast

talk without being asked to

talk gratuitously

talk with your hands

talk about worldly affairs

talk back rudely

argue

smile condescendingly at others' words

use elegant expressions

boast

avoid speaking directly

speak with a knowing air

jump from topic to topic

use fancy words

speak of past events that cannot be changed

speak like a pedant

avoid direct questions

speak ill of others

speak grandly of enlightenment

carry on while drunk

speak in an obnoxious manner

yell at children

make up fantastic stories

speak while angry

name-drop

ignore the people to whom you are speaking

speak sanctimoniously of gods and buddhas

use sugary speech

use flattering speech

speaking of things of which you have no knowledge
monopolizing the conversation
talking about others behind their backs
speaking with conceit
bad-mouthing others
chanting prayers ostentatiously
complaining about the amount of alms
giving long-winded sermons
speaking affectedly like an artist
speaking affectedly like a tea master

The *I Ching* States Happiness Lies in the
Proper Blend of:

Hot-cold
good-bad
black-white
beautiful-ugly
large-small
wisdom-foolishness
long-short
brightness-darkness
high-low
partial-whole
relaxation-quickness
increase-decrease
purity-filth
slow-fast.

Buddha's Path

This is the Way he traveled to flee the world;
This is the Way he traveled to return to the world.
I, too, come and go along this Sacred Path
That bridges life and death
And traverses illusion.

The ancient buddhas taught the Dharma
Not for its own sake but to assist us.
If we really knew ourselves
We would not have to rely on old teachers.
The wise go right to the core
And leap beyond appearances;
The foolish cleave to details
And get ensnared by words and letters.
Such people envy the accomplishments of others
And work feverishly to attain the same things.
Cling to truth and it becomes falsehood;
Understand falsehood and it becomes truth.
Truth and falsehood are two sides of a coin:
Neither accept nor reject either one.
Don't waste your precious time fruitlessly
Trying to gauge the depths of life's ups and downs.

When I see learned priests lecturing on the sutras
Their eloquence seems to flow in circles:
The Five Periods of the Law and the Eight Doctrines—
Nice theories, but who needs them?
Pedants have swelled heads
But ask them matters of real importance
And all you get is empty babble.

Even if you consume as many books
As the sands of the Ganges
It is not as good as really catching
One verse of Zen.
If you want the secret of Buddhism,
Here it is: Everything is in the Heart!



"These days/my favorite thing/of all:/pretty little/clam shells!"

Priest Senkei, a true man of the Way!
He worked in silence—no extra words for him.
For thirty years he stayed in Kokusen's community.
He never did meditation, never read the sutras,
And never said a word about Buddhism,
Just worked for the good of all.
I saw him but did not really see him;
I met him but did not really meet him.
Ah, he is impossible to imitate.
Priest Senkei, a true man of the Way!

Buddha proclaimed countless teachings,
Each one revealing the purest truth.
Just as each breeze and every drop of rain
Refreshes the forest,
There is no sutra that does not lead to salvation.
Grasp the essence of each branch
And stop trying to rank Buddha's teaching.

The Great Way leads nowhere,
And it is no place.
Affirm it and you miss it by a mile;
"This is delusion, that is enlightenment" is also wide of the
mark.
You can expound theories of "existence" and
"nonexistence"
Yet even talk of the "Middle Way" can get you sidetracked.
I'll just keep my wonderful experiences to myself.
Babble about enlightenment, and your words get torn to
shreds.

The wind has settled, the blossoms have fallen;
Birds sing, the mountains grow dark—
This is the wondrous power of Buddhism.

In Otogo Forest beneath Mount Kugami
You'll find the tiny hut where I pass my days.
Still no temples or villas for me!
I'd rather live with the fresh breezes and the bright moon,
Playing with the village children or making poems.
If you ask about me, you'll probably say,
"What is that foolish monk doing now?"

Zen Dialogue in a Dream

I was in town begging when I met an old sage:
“Monk, why do you live in the cloud-covered peaks?”
“Old fellow,” I countered, “why do you remain in this dusty
place?”
We both wanted to reply but neither of us spoke.
Then my reverie was shattered by the sound of the temple
bell.

I sat facing you for hours but you didn't speak;
Then I finally understood the unspoken meaning.
Removed from their covers, books lay scattered about;
Outside the bamboo screen, rain beats against the plum
tree.



Jizō, patron saint of children and wayfarers, carved by Ryōkan.

Dreaming of Saichi, My Long-Deceased Disciple

I met you again after more than twenty years,
On a rickety bridge, beneath the hazy moon, in the spring
wind.
We walked on and on, arm in arm, talking and talking,
Until suddenly we were in front of Hachiman Shrine!

Inscription on My Painting of a Skull

All things born of karma disappear when that karma is
exhausted,
But where is this karma born?
From whence does the First Cause arise?
Here words and thoughts are of no avail.
I asked an old woman in the east about the matter
But she wasn't pleased,
And the old fellow in the west
Just frowned and left.
I wrote the problem on a rice cake
And gave it to a puppy
But even it wouldn't bite.
Realizing that such words are bad luck,
I blended life and death into a pill
And gave it to a weather-beaten skull.
The skull suddenly leaped up,
Singing and dancing for me:
A spellbinding ballad that spanned past, present, and
future,
A marvelous dance that sported through the realm of
samsara.
The skull covered everything most thoroughly;
I saw the moon set on Ch'ang-an and heard its midnight
bells!

Someday I'll be a weather-beaten skull resting on a grass
pillow,
Serenaded by a stray bird or two.
Kings and commoners end up the same,
No more enduring than last night's dream.

I descended to the valley to gather orchids
But the basin was blanketed with frost and dew,
And it took all day to find the flowers.
Suddenly I thought of an old friend
Separated from me by miles of mountains and rivers.
Will we ever meet again?
I gaze toward the sky,
Tears streaming down my cheeks.

We meet only to part,
Coming and going like white clouds,
Leaving traces so faint
Hardly a soul notices.

I have an old staff
That has well served many.
Its bark has worn away;
All that remains is the strong core.
I used it to test the waters,
And often it got me out of trouble.
Now, though, it leans against the wall,
Out of service for years.

In a dilapidated three-room hut
I've grown old and tired;
This winter cold is the
Worst I've suffered through.
I sip thin gruel, waiting for the
Freezing night to pass.
Can I last until spring finally arrives?
Unable to beg for rice,
How will I survive the chill?
Even meditation helps no longer;
Nothing left to do but compose poems
In memory of deceased friends.



"Day after day, snow falls . . ."

On the slope of
Kugami,
In the mountain shade,
How many years
Was this hut my home?
Now it is time
To leave it empty—
My memory will fade
Like summer grasses.
Back and forth
I paced around it
And then walked away
Until the hut disappeared
Among the trees.
As I walk, I keep
Looking back after each bend,
Looking back at that place.

I took my staff and slowly made my way
Up to the hut where I spent so many years.
The walls had crumbled and it now sheltered foxes and
rabbits.
The well by the bamboo grove was dry,
And thick cobwebs covered the window where I once read
by moonlight.
The steps were overrun with wild weeds,
And a lone cricket sang in the bitter cold.
I walked about fitfully, unable to tear myself away
As the sun set sadly.

An Abandoned Hut

Those plum blossoms
We once floated in our wine.
Now the flowers are
Scattered, unnoticed,
All over the ground.

Caged Birds

Time and again
You, too,
Must long for
Your old nest
Deep in the mountains.

Love Poems between Ryōkan and Teishin

Was it really you
I saw,
Or is this joy
I still feel
Only a dream?

—TEISHIN

In this dream world
We doze
And talk of dreams—
Dream, dream on,
As much as you wish.

—RYŌKAN

Here with you
I could remain
For countless days and years,
Silent as the bright moon
We gazed at together.

—TEISHIN

If your heart
Remains unchanged,
We will be bound as tightly
As an endless vine
For ages and ages.

—RYŌKAN

Have you forgotten me
Or lost the path here?
Now I wait for you

All day, every day.
But you do not appear.

—RYŌKAN

The moon, I'm sure,
Is shining brightly
High above the mountains,
But gloomy clouds
Shroud the peak in darkness.

—TEISHIN

You must rise above
The gloomy clouds
Covering the mountaintop.
Otherwise, how will you
Ever see the brightness?

—RYŌKAN



The nun Teishin. "From heaven/a gift more precious/than jewels or gold:/a visit from you/on the first day of spring!"

Chanting old poems,
Making our own verses,
Playing with a cloth ball,
Together in the fields—
Two people, one heart.

The breeze is fresh,
The moon so bright—
Together
Let's dance until dawn
As a farewell to my old age.

Exchange of Poems on Ryōkan's Deathbed

“When, when?” I sighed.

The one I longed for
Has finally come;
With her now,
I have all that I need.

—RYŌKAN

We monastics are said
To overcome the realm
Of life and death—
Yet I cannot bear the
Sorrow of our parting.

—TEISHIN

Everywhere you look
The crimson leaves
Scatter—
One by one,
Front and back.

—RYŌKAN

My legacy—
What will it be?
Flowers in spring,
The cuckoo in summer,
And the crimson maples
Of autumn . . .

Note on the Illustrations

THE INK PAINTINGS in the text were created by Koshi no Sengai (Sakuichi Saitō, 1895-1958). Devoting himself to paintings of Ryōkan, the artist passed his days leading a quiet and simple life in the Niigata countryside. Several of the paintings reproduced here include calligraphy of Ryōkan's poems.

About the Translator

Zen scholar and Aikido instructor John Stevens has lived in Japan since 1973. He is the author of over a dozen books on Buddhism, Zen, Aikido, and Asian culture, including *The Art of Peace*; *Three Zen Masters: Ikkyu, Hakuin, and Ryokan*; *Sacred Calligraphy of the East*; *Lust for Enlightenment: Buddhism and Sex*; *Abundant Peace*; *The Secrets of Aikido*; and *The Shambhala Guide to Aikido*.

About the Illustrator

Koshi no Sengai was born in Niigata Prefecture in 1895. Devoting his career to paintings of Ryokan, the artist led a quiet and simple life in the Niigata countryside and died in 1958.

Also by John Stevens

The Art of Peace

These inspirational teachings show that the real way of the warrior is based on compassion, wisdom, fearlessness, and love of nature.

One Robe, One Bowl

Although Ryōkan was born in eighteenth-century Japan, his extraordinary poems, capturing in a few luminous phrases both the beauty and the pathos of human life, reach far beyond time and place to touch the springs of humanity. This book offers a representative selection of his verse in both Chinese and Japanese modes.

Sacred Calligraphy of the East

This beautifully illustrated book covers such topics as the history and spirit of Eastern calligraphy, the art of copying religious texts, the biographies of important Zen calligraphers, and practical instructions on materials and techniques for the contemporary student. No knowledge of the languages discussed is required for the reader to appreciate the study of this ancient practice.

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