

SKY ABOVE,
GREAT WIND



The Life and Poetry of Zen Master Ryokan

KAZUAKI TANAHASHI

“The Zen monk Ryokan has become one of the most popular poets in Japanese history. Living in a small mountain hut rather than a temple, and preferring to play with children to ceremonies, he captured his warm humanity, gentle humor, and deep spirit in his poetry. This fine new translation by Kazuaki Tanahashi includes a generous serving of his poetry in Japanese and Chinese styles, as well as a biography, analysis of his poetry, and charming anecdotes about his life. It is easy to see why Ryokan has become so beloved, not only in Japan, but in the rest of the world as well.”

—Stephen Addiss, author of *The Art of Zen* and *The Art of Haiku*

“The ‘Great Fool’ Ryokan is one of the most revered figures in Japanese poetry, and in Kaz Tanahashi, he has found as perfect an advocate-translator as could be imagined. In this translation, we find an insightful introduction and poem after poem revealing Ryokan’s great good humor, his aloneness, his eccentricities, his poverty in a small hut in the mountains, his Buddhist insightfulness, his love of children and silk-thread balls, and, eventually, his love for a much younger woman. This is a marvelous achievement and a joy to read.”

—Sam Hamill, author of *Almost Paradise*

ABOUT THE BOOK

Ryokan (1758–1831) is, along with Dogen and Hakuin, one of the three giants of Zen in Japan. But unlike his two renowned colleagues, Ryokan was a societal dropout, living mostly as a hermit and a beggar. He was never head of a monastery or temple. He liked playing with children. He had no dharma heir. Even so, people recognized the depth of his realization, and he was sought out by people of all walks of life for the teaching to be experienced in just being around him. His poetry and art were wildly popular even in his lifetime. He is now regarded as

one of the greatest poets of the Edo Period, along with Basho, Buson, and Issa. He was also a master artist-calligrapher with a very distinctive style, due mostly to his unique and irrepressible spirit, but also because he was so poor he didn't usually have materials: his distinctive thin line was due to the fact that he often used twigs rather than the brushes he couldn't afford. He was said to practice his brushwork with his fingers in the air when he didn't have any paper. There are hilarious stories about how people tried to trick him into doing art for them, and about how he frustrated their attempts. As an old man, he fell in love with a young Zen nun who also became his student. His affection for her colors the mature poems of his late period. This collection contains more than 140 of Ryokan's poems, with selections of his art, and of the very funny anecdotes about him.

KAZUAKI TANAHASHI, a Japanese-trained calligrapher, is the pioneer of the genre of "one stroke painting" as well as the creator of multicolor *enso* (Zen circles). His brushwork has been shown in solo exhibitions in galleries, museums, and universities all over the world. Tanahashi has edited several books of Dogen's writings and is also the author of *Brush Mind*.

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*To Joan Halifax Roshi,
my luminous companion in dharma*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Ryokan (1758–1831) was a pilgrim, a hermit, and a beggar. He was one of the numberless spiritual practitioners who gave up secular life to practice humility in search of the highest truth. He was free from family, social obligations, possessions, good looks, status, and fame. After completing rigorous training in a monastery for ten years, he disassociated himself from religious institutions. Enduring harsh weather, extreme poverty, sickness, and ridicule by others, Ryokan sustained his solitary Zen Buddhist practice in good humor. He composed poems that were lofty yet imaginative and fresh, presented in gracefully dancing brushstrokes.

He was a rare dharma practitioner who could express many shades of emotion simply and fully. The poetic exchange of love with the young nun Teishin in his final years was of celestial poignancy. His self-proclaimed laziness and stupidity disarmed many of his contemporaries as well as those in later generations. People could identify themselves with his unadorned humanity. Although he shunned the pursuit of name and profit, ironically Ryokan became famous in his locality as an eccentric Zen master. His behavior spawned innumerable anecdotes, some of which are simply hilarious. Today he is one of the most beloved monks in Japan.

I am delighted to present Ryokan in this volume with a new translation of selected poems and samples of his calligraphy. This book follows my translation of texts by Dogen and Hakuin, including *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Shobo Genzo* and *Penetrating Laughter: Hakuin's Zen and Art*, on which I collaborated with excellent colleagues. In my mind, Dogen, Hakuin, and Ryokan are the three greatest figures in the history of Zen Buddhism in Japan. It is not difficult to see commonalities among

these monks in their search, practice, enlightenment, and teaching. On the other hand, they seem to form a triangle of extreme opposites in their expressions of enlightenment.

Dogen (1200–1253) was a profound thinker, an outstanding elucidator of meditation, and one of the earliest leaders of Japanese Zen Buddhism. He established detailed guidelines for monastic life centering on the practice of “just sitting” and is regarded as the founder of the Soto Zen School, one of the two major schools of Zen in Japan.

Hakuin (1685–1768) was an assertive and energetic popularizer of Zen teaching. His expression was coarse, colloquial, and at times funny. He systematized training based on the use of koans, or paradoxical questions utilized to induce students to break through to realization. He is regarded as the restorer of the Rinzai Zen School, the other major school of Zen in Japan.

Unlike Dogen and Hakuin, Ryokan did not engage in the training of monks in monasteries. Instead, he practiced alone in extreme austerity without producing any dharma heir. He dropped out of society as well as the Zen community and therefore could be seen as a failure as a Zen teacher. Having no possessions may not have been the most effective way to attain freedom. It was nevertheless Ryokan’s way of life.

Creative thinking and mystical encounters often unfold in silent solitude. The more intricately engaged in society we are, the more we may need to be in retreat. Humility is the highest means to selflessness, clarity, and compassion. Through his utterly modest and unaffected life, Ryokan unfolds a vast realm of serenity that can inspire us all.

It has been a three-year journey working on this book with Friederike Boissevain. Together we studied Ryokan’s Japanese and Chinese poems, while I developed my own English translation, notes, and commentary on his life and work, which have become a basis for our German version. I enjoyed every moment of our collaboration and am grateful for the generous support of her husband, Harald Schöcklmann. The poems presented in this book have been selected from Toshiro Tanikawa’s complete annotated collection of

Ryokan's poems in three volumes. I would like to express my deep appreciation of his scholarship.

Editorial advice by Barbara Bonfigli, Marilyn Preston, Karuna Tanahashi, Roberta Werdinger, and Susan O'Leary has enormously benefited me. My deep appreciation goes to Peter Levitt, whose outstanding poetic sensitivity and enthusiastic help have improved the text a great deal. I thank Taigen Dan Leighton for the initial translation of the poem "On a somber spring evening . . ." presented in my introduction. Tsuyoshi Mieda, Mahiru Watanabe, Asaki Watanabe, and Cedarose Siemon helped me in production of the illustrations.

I would also like to thank the staff of the Ryokan Memorial Museum, Ken'ichi Yasuda, and Taichi Iijima, for providing photographs for this book.

It is always a great pleasure to work with the staff of Shambhala Publications. I would like to thank in particular Dave O'Neal and Hazel Bercholz. My deep appreciation goes to DeAnna Satre for her fine copyediting.

KAZUAKI TANAHASHI

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Notes to the Reader

TRANSLITERATION

Macrons for Japanese words are used only in the transliteration of poems in the chapter “Ryokan’s Poetic Forms.”

NAMES

Ryokan’s boyhood name is Eizo, but I sometimes use his monk name, Ryokan, in describing his young days.


DATES

This book follows the lunar calendar, used traditionally in East Asia. The first through third months correspond to spring, and the other seasons follow in three-month periods. The fifteenth day of the month is the day of the full moon. (An extra month was occasionally added to make up a year.)

AGE

This book follows the traditional East Asian way of counting ages, where a person is one year old at birth and gains a year on New Year’s Day.

NOTES

Note callouts are not used in this book. Poems with endnotes are marked with .

PUBLISHER’S NOTE

This book contains Japanese characters and diacritics. If you encounter difficulty displaying these characters, please set your e-

reader device to publisher defaults (if available) or to an alternate font.

Maps of Sites Related to Ryokan



Key to Maps

- Bold** Province
- ▲ Mountain
- ⊙ City
- Village, Town



ECHIGO

INTRODUCTION

Pristine Solitude

Monk Ryokan kept extreme austerity in his Zen meditation practice. He lived alone, mostly in the rural area of the province of Echigo—present-day Niigata Prefecture—close to the end of the feudal Edo Period (1600–1867).

Ryokan wrote poems about hermitic life and the practice of *takuhatsu*—begging food—in a way no one else could put into words:

Only thing
the thief left behind—
moon in my window.

His poems eloquently reflect his experience of the seasonal manifestations of nature and the fragility of human life, as well as the joy of seeing friends and playing with children. Some of his verses are profoundly Buddhist. For example, one of his short poems reads:

Within this serene snowfall
one billion worlds
arise.
In each,
flurries come floating down.

“One billion worlds” is a way of describing an entire universe in Buddhist scriptures. Ryokan’s poetic imagery brought this vast cosmological concept into the infinite boundlessness of falling snow.

The snow that covered his thatch-roofed one-room hut on a deep mountainside is a sublime reminder of emptiness.

The following haiku presents the Zen paradox that flourishing is no different from withering:

Falling blossoms.
Blossoms in bloom are also
falling blossoms.

Ryokan was honest about his loneliness and yearning for human contact. He wrote in a highly refined, classical style, often using archaic “pillow words” (formulaic modifying phrases to certain words; for example, “grass-pillow” modifies “travel”) no longer popular in the Edo Period. At the same time, his words express a sense of carefree warmth and love that touches a great number of people. Although he never published collections of his own, his poems were collected even while he was alive as well as afterward. He is now regarded as one of the greatest poets of the Edo Period, along with Basho, Buson, and Issa.

A well-known self-portrait of Ryokan in his own verse ([fig. 1](#)) describes his lifestyle:

It is not that
I avoid mixing
with the world;
but I do better
playing alone.



Figure 1. Self-portrait.

Yoshishige Kera, author of *Anecdotes of Zen Master Ryokan* (Ryokan Zenji Kiwa Shu), who knew Ryokan in his young days, describes him thus: “The master was full of lofty spirit, which was naturally expressed. He was tall and slender, like a Daoist sorcerer, with a high nose and long eyes. He was gentle, stern, and not presumptuous. . . . Ryokan did not show excitement or anger. I never heard him speak fast. His way of eating and drinking was slow, almost like a fool.”

Certainly, Ryokan was not well dressed. He wore the same tattered, simple black robe all the time. According to *Anecdotes*:

Ryokan had uncombed hair and an unshaven face, walked barefoot and wore a torn robe. He would go into people’s kitchens and beg food. Once when he visited a house, something valuable was stolen. People in the house thought Ryokan was the thief, escaped from the local prison. They summoned the villagers by blowing a conch shell and hitting a wooden board. The villagers bound him with a rope and tried to bury him alive. But Ryokan did not say a word, letting them do what they wanted.

Before they threw him into a hole, someone who knew Ryokan noticed them and said, "What are you doing? This is the famous Zen master Ryokan. Untie the rope right away and apologize to him." Astonished, the villagers did so.

The person who rescued him said, "Why didn't you say that it was a false accusation?"

Ryokan said, "All the villagers suspected me. Even if I had explained, that wouldn't have removed their suspicion. There is nothing better than saying nothing."

Ryokan sometimes accepted invitations from his supporters to stay for meals or overnight. Kera reflects:

Ryokan stayed with us for a couple of days. A peaceful atmosphere filled our house, and everyone became harmonious. This atmosphere remained for some days even after he left. As soon as I started talking with him, I realized that my heart had become pure. He did not explain Zen or other Buddhist scriptures, nor did he encourage wholesome actions. He would burn firewood in the kitchen or sit in meditation in our living room. He did not talk about literature or ethics. He was indescribably relaxed. He taught others only by his presence.

There is no doubt that Ryokan's sparse use or absence of words came from his lifelong practice of contemplation. An episode recorded by the same author beautifully illustrates Ryokan's thoughtful way of guiding a young person:

The household of Ryokan's family, Yamamoto of the Tachibana-ya [village headman's office name], was managed by his younger brother Yushi after Ryokan had left home and become a monk. Yushi's eldest son, Umanosuke, was squandering the family money for his own personal pleasures. Asked by Umanosuke's mother to give him advice, Ryokan went to the Tachibana-ya. He stayed there for three days but said nothing. On his departure for his hermitage, Ryokan stood at the porch, called for Umanosuke, and asked him to tie the strings of his straw sandals. Umanosuke's mother, who stood behind the

screen, was hoping that Ryokan would give him some strong advice.

Umanosuke didn't understand why Ryokan had asked him to do such an unusual thing but followed his request. As he bent to the task, he felt something wet on his neck. He was surprised and looked up. He saw Ryokan's eyes full of tears. At that moment, he felt repentance for his wrongdoings. Ryokan stood up and left without a word.

Art beyond Art

Ryokan stands out from his era—not only as a poet but also as a calligrapher. Bosai Kameda, a renowned Confucian scholar, calligrapher, and friend of Ryokan's, once commented: "His calligraphy has divine spirit."

Ryokan created his calligraphy without making any revisions, using only small brushes. As a result, all the lines he drew are thin. At times he had an ink stick to grind with water on an inkstone. Other times, he did not even have a brush. A short poem of his says:

No brush—
how pathetic I am!
This morning again,
I walk with a cane
and knock on the temple door.

Unless some sheets had been donated, he usually had no paper. Ryokan admired Huaisu, an eighth-century Tang dynasty Chinese monk renowned for his wild cursive script, and Tofu Ono, a ninth-to-tenth-century Japanese court poet and calligrapher versed in *kana* (phonetic writing). Ryokan borrowed books of stone rubbings from classical calligraphic masterpieces, studying them assiduously. Legend has it that he practiced his brushwork in the air.

Even in his own time, people forged Ryokan's calligraphy and sold the pieces to others. Many of his acquaintances wanted his

calligraphy, but he was not always willing to give it. Kera's *Anecdotes* says:

When someone asked Ryokan to do calligraphy, he would not do it right away, saying, "I will write for you after I practice and get better." But when inspired, he would paint many pieces all at once, paying no mind to brush quality, inkstones, paper, or ink. As he would write from memory, some of his poems had missed characters. He wrote many different versions of the same poem.

...

The head of a big trading enterprise in Teradomari Town had unsuccessfully tried to get hold of Ryokan's calligraphy. When Ryokan stopped to beg at his house, he pulled Ryokan inside. Then he asked him to do some writing on the golden screen he had prepared, saying, "I will not let you go until you finish."

Left with no choice, Ryokan held the brush and wrote: "I don't want to. I don't want to. I don't want to. I don't want to."

On the other hand, Ryokan was happy to do calligraphy for children. It is said in *Anecdotes*:

When Ryokan was begging in the highway station town Tsubame, a child with a sheet of paper came to him and said, "Rev. Ryokan, please write something on this paper." Ryokan asked, "What are you going to use it for?" "I am going to make a kite and fly it. So, please write some words to call the wind."

Right away, Ryokan wrote four big characters, "Sky above, great wind," and gave the calligraphy to the child.

He may have given similar pieces to other children. At least one piece has remained, becoming one of his most popular works (fig. 2). These four ideographs are written in Chinese-origin script commonly used in East Asia, known as *kanji* in Japanese. They are usually read from the right column, top down, to the center column, *tian shan da feng* in Chinese, which reads *ten jo dai fu* in Japanese. The left column says, "Ryokan *sho*" (Written by Ryokan). This calligraphy was done in a formal style.



Figure 2. "Sky above . . ."

There is no lack of technical imperfection in this piece. Ryokan started the first three characters with too much ink, causing them to bleed excessively on the rice paper at the beginning of the strokes. On the other hand, he was losing ink and strength of lines at the bottom of the two downward-sweeping strokes of the first character, *sky* (heaven). His hand wiggled on the vertical stroke of the second character, *above*, as well as on the top-to-right-hand stroke of the last character, *wind*. *Sky* is too large, and *above* is too small. *Wind* is placed overly to the left, which forced him to squeeze his signature.

In general, technically perfect and elegantly rendered pieces of calligraphy are appreciated. Most calligraphers strive to meet such standards, and in many cases their desire for excellence is exposed through the brush lines. However, calligraphers and art lovers, including me, look at this piece in awe. We immediately notice that the artist was radically unpretentious and unassuming, showing no desire whatsoever to make the brushwork "look good." As you will see in other samples, Ryokan was a skilled calligrapher. In this piece, on the other hand, he went far beyond skills, revealing himself completely off guard. We see vast freedom in his childlike brushstrokes, which demonstrate that Ryokan was a child when he was with children.

A peasant farmer once said to Ryokan, “Your writings are difficult to read. Can you write something even I can read?” Ryokan wrote “One, two, three,” and said, “I hope you can read this” (fig. 3).

Generally, *one* is represented by a single horizontal line, while *two* and *three* are depicted with two and three horizontal lines. Indeed, there are no easier symbols than these in East Asian ideography. The villager who was given this calligraphy might have thought this was Ryokan’s nonsense or joke. But in the Zen tradition, numbers sometimes indicate reality itself: words beyond words. For example, when the thirteenth-century Japanese monk Dogen was studying in China, an old cook from a Zen monastery said, “To study words you must know the origin of words. To endeavor in practice you must know the origin of practice.” Dogen asked, “What are words?” The cook said, “One, two, three, four, five.” Dogen asked further, “What is practice?” The cook said, “Nothing in the entire universe is hidden.” As a dharma descendant of Zen master Dogen, Ryokan might have learned about this dialogue.



Figure 3. "One, two, three."

When the ideographic writing system was created in China about four thousand years ago, these numbers were drawn on soil or carved on wood or animal bones with straight geometric lines. After the brush was invented about two thousand years later, calligraphers developed the aesthetics of asymmetry within each stroke and among elements of each ideograph. This piece by Ryokan, written in a semicursive script, follows this tradition.

The first horizontal line goes up, which is common in Chinese-style calligraphy, but with atypical steepness. Following the initial press down, the brush was gradually pulled up, making its trace finer. It arched gracefully, then slightly pushed down to create a consistent width on its latter half. At the end of the line, the brush was lightly pressed down and swept off toward the next symbol.

In *two*, the line above is typically shorter than the line below. But in this case, the line above is excessively short—almost a dot—subtly curving up and sweeping off again. The second stroke starts pointed, forming a circular line followed by a most subtle curving-down line.

The first two strokes of *three* are two diagonal lines of different angles connected with a ligature. Preceded by an invisible ligature, the last line of this character is straight. On the final column he wrote: “*Shaku Ryokan sho*” (Written by monk Ryokan).

There is ample space between lines and characters. Ryokan created a style of calligraphy where even extra thin lines with few strokes can hold a large amount of space.

Next is an example of Ryokan’s reproduction of the *Heart Sutra* (fig. 4). This is a fragment—the last part of the sutra, a version translated from Sanskrit into Chinese by Xuanzang of the seventh century. The *Heart Sutra* is one of the shortest but most widely chanted scriptures in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition.

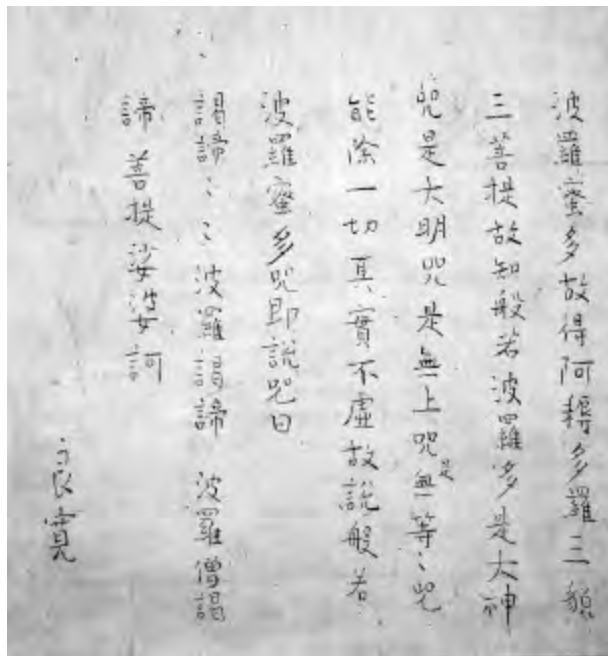


Figure 4. *Heart Sutra*, portion.

This part of the text can be translated as follows:

[Buddhas in the past, present, and future, who] realize [wisdom beyond wisdom], manifest unsurpassable and thorough

awakening. Know that realizing wisdom beyond wisdom is no other than this wondrous mantra—luminous, unequalled, and supreme. It relieves all suffering. It is genuine and not illusory.

So set forth this mantra of realizing wisdom beyond wisdom.

Set forth this mantra that says: *Gaté, gaté, paragaté, parasamgaté*, bodhi! Svaha!

RYOKAN

Here again, Ryokan's brush lines in the formal script are extremely thin, delicate, and sensitive. The calligraphic composition of each character is rather traditional, yet it reveals his unique, slightly off-centered style. Columns sway naturally. One missed character on the third column is added. He signed his name "Ryokan" on the last column.

Now, in [figure 5](#) is a sample of his Chinese-style poem.

This is a four-column poem consisting of seven ideographs per column. But Ryokan wrote it in five columns, consisting of five, six, six, five, and six ideographs. It can be translated as follows:

Today while begging, I got caught in a shower.
For some time I found shelter in an old shrine.
Laugh if you like at the one jar and one bowl I own!
Humble and cleansed—my life a broken house.

WRITTEN BY RYOKAN

This piece was dynamically rendered in cursive script. The brush started out wet and gradually became dry, leaving highly sophisticated and captivating marks. The columns spontaneously tilt, creating vivid space between the lines and on each side of the page. The characters vary radically in size. The calligraphy's lack of fixed posture mirrors the message of the poem, which speaks of no possessions.

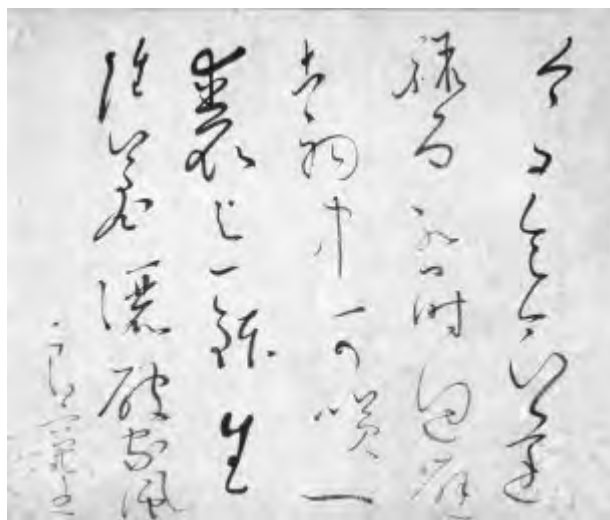


Figure 5. "Today while begging . . ."

Just as he was careful about his use of words in daily life, his poems and letters were all written artistically, whether it was a thank-you letter or a letter to his donors asking for pickled plums or a scoop of soybean paste. One poem of his says:

Brush lines
 in a letter to a dear friend
 turn out beautifully.
 A moment of
 joy.

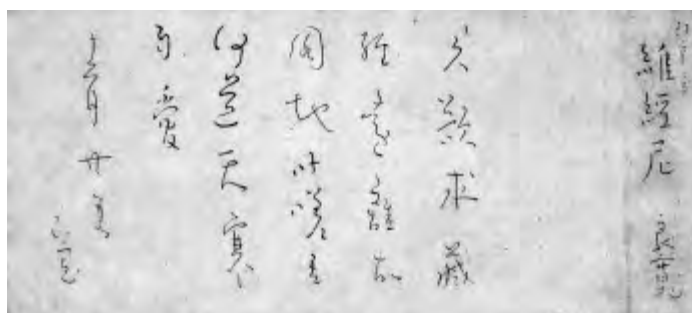


Figure 6. "To Nun Ikkyo."

Now, in [figure 6](#) is a sample of one of his notes.

TO NUN IKYO, EDO RYOKAN

You are trying to acquire the great canon
far away from home.
Ah, what can I say?
The sky is cold.
Take care.

The twenty-fifth day of the twelfth month

RYOKAN

This note is strikingly short for a long-distance correspondence. Perhaps a messenger came to his hut and asked him to write a note to the nun, as someone was going to Edo to see her and the messenger did not want to wait. Ryokan had been encouraging Ikyo, a niece of his friend Saichi, to endeavor in the practice of dharma. In 1818 her teacher Kohan of the Tokusho Monastery in Yoita wanted to purchase an entire 9,056-volume Chinese-language Buddhist canon but was short of money. So Ikyo went to Edo by herself to raise funds by way of takuhatsu. Ryokan wrote this note in Chinese. It was rather unusual for him, but for educated Buddhists of that time, reading and writing Chinese were not difficult.

The vertical fold on the right side shows that the paper was accordion folded, with the right column functioning as a cover. This is why Ryokan's name appears twice on this sheet of paper. The cover was written in semicursive script and the inside in cursive script. Allowing plenty of space at the beginning and between letters, each character is rendered leisurely and elegantly.

Besides creating Chinese-style calligraphy, Ryokan did some brushwork in kana (phonetic script). Here in [figure 7](#) is a sample of a *tanka*, a traditional Japanese short poem.

I came and found
my home village
desolate.
Only fallen leaves
over the garden fence.

RYOKAN

These phonetic letters are called *man'yo gana*, which was originally used in the *Ten Thousand Leaves Anthology* (Man'yo Shu), compiled in the mid-eighth century, when ideographs were used as phonetic symbols. These phonetic letters were thus an archaic way of using ideographs. They look similar to those in Chinese-style poems, except here some characters are extremely simplified and stylized. (I will discuss details of the scripts Ryokan used in the chapter "Ryokan's Poetic Forms.")

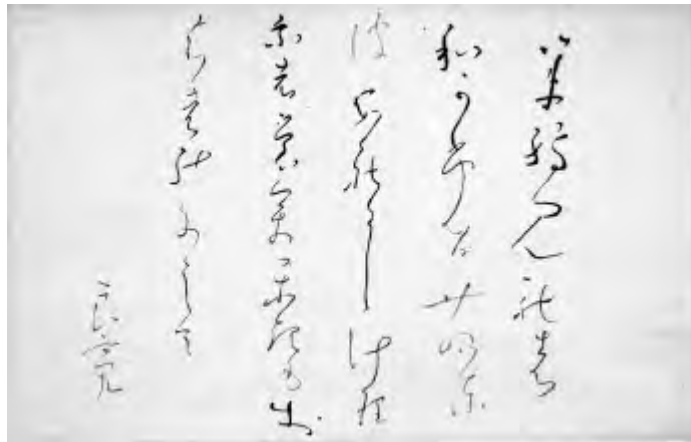


Figure 7. "I came and found . . ."

Ryokan wrote this thirty-one-syllable poem in columns of five, six, six, eight, and six characters and ended with his own signature. A frequent use of ligatures fills this piece with cascading brush lines. The darkness of ink recedes and returns rhythmically.

Here in [figure 8](#) is another example of a tanka with fluid but settled brush movements in man'yo gana, rendered on a fan-shaped piece of paper.

Playing with children
 under
 a shrine forest.
 Let this spring day
 not turn to dusk!

WRITTEN BY RYOKAN



Figure 8. "Playing with children . . ."

Classically masterful and uninhibitedly playful, with exquisite use of negative space, Ryokan's brushstrokes are slender yet highly spirited and amazingly powerful.

He left a great many pieces of calligraphy. In addition, according to the records, he produced some monochromatic paintings. I am not, however, aware of any extant paintings that can be identified as his work, other than his self-portrait (fig. 1). (Some Ryokan books are illustrated with paintings, but they are not Ryokan's own works.)

Because the vulnerability and spiritual depth of the artist are revealed directly through the drawn lines, calligraphy is regarded as the highest art form in all of East Asia. That is why the scroll of a Zen master is hung in the main alcove of a tearoom: to remind the host and guests of the presence of an awakened person, ancient or contemporary.

Let us compare the calligraphic works of the three outstanding Japanese Zen masters mentioned in the preface as a triangle of extreme contrasts. The brushwork of Dogen, the Soto School monk, Ryokan's dharma ancestor, is straight-forward, precise, and highly consistent. The calligraphy of Hakuin—a master of the Rinzai School who lived several decades before Ryokan—is bold, coarse, and compelling. Ryokan's brushstrokes are spontaneous, irregular, and fluid. He never stamped a seal on his brush-drawn pieces, disregarding the widely accepted East Asian convention.

With no desire to seek recognition or status, Ryokan disassociated himself from institutional Zen and art circles. In fact, he opposed established artists whose styles were highly intellectual and technical. *Anecdotes* includes a story, perhaps somewhat

dramatized, that captures the spirit of Ryokan's unconventional and informal art:

Renowned calligrapher Ryoko Maki of Niigata came back from Edo and was working here and there in Echigo Province. He was commissioned by a wealthy man to do calligraphy on a pair of screens. After finishing the first screen, he took a rest in another room. An old monk slipped into the empty room, boldly snatched the brush, added calligraphy on the second scroll, and vanished. Someone noticed it and informed the man of the house. Distressed, the man went to the room with the calligrapher, who immediately realized it was an extraordinary piece with vivid and powerful brush strokes. He said to the man of the house, "Send for the old monk. Quick."

Seeing someone chasing after him, Ryokan fell to the ground and begged: "Please spare my life."

The messenger said, "I am not here to harm you." He explained what he had been told and took him back to the house. The man of the house treated Ryokan graciously and, together with the calligrapher, thanked him for completing the precious jewels on the screens.

Ryokan's most frequently quoted saying on art is, "I hate calligraphers' calligraphy and poets' poems." He detested themed poetic competitions. He seems to have believed that artificiality and professionalism got in the way of genuinely heartfelt expression. One of his Chinese-style poems shows his critique of an emerging poet:

What a pity, dear youth,
who lives quietly writing poetry.
You follow the forms of the Han and Tang dynasties
and copy contemporary styles.
Carefully you craft lines
sprinkled with novelty.
But what good are your efforts
if you don't express what is deep in your heart?

In another poem he writes:

Who calls my poems poems?
My poems are not poems.
Only when you know my poems are not poems
can we together speak about poems.

Ryokan read literature extensively in his youth. It seems that he was already an accomplished calligrapher in his Wandering Period soon after his Zen training. After secluding himself in a mountain hut with limited or almost nonexistent resources, he studied classical masters' works with vigor.

Ryokan penetrated the artistry of poetry and calligraphy by straightforwardly expressing what is most essential in life. He was humble about his own art, and yet his brushwork surpassed the traditional standard of calligraphy. And his words "my poems are not poems" demonstrate that his poems went beyond the bounds of poetry.

In Search of Genuine Freedom

Ryokan was born in the twelfth month of 1758, the first son of Jirozaemon and Hideko Yamamoto, in a port village called Izumosaki in Echigo Province. His boyhood name was Eizo. Izumosaki, located on a narrow strip of land between hills and the sea, was a key station on the Hokkoku (Northern Country) Highway, which ran along the Sea of Japan in the central part of the main island, Honshu. It had a distant view of Sado Island, where prisoners were forced to labor in Japan's largest gold mine.

The Yamamoto family's official name was Tachibana-ya. They held this prestigious title because the master of this household functioned as a hereditary village headman under the Shogun government's ruling system. He also served as a Shinto priest who conducted ceremonies in the local shrine. Jirozaemon was a locally known haiku poet whose literary name was Inan. Eizo had three brothers and three sisters.

Japan had been ruled by the Shogun government of the Tokugawa family for more than 150 years. Except for trade with the Dutch and

Chinese through the tiny island port of Nagasaki, it was isolated from foreign countries, thus enjoying a period of no war. People were divided into four classes: samurai, farmer, artisan, and trader. Samurai were destined to serve their lord samurai, while farmers, who were tied to their land and to landowners, were not allowed to move. Most of the nation was governed by great and minor lords. Because Izumosaki was of significant strategic importance for the transport of gold, however, it was one of the regions directly controlled by the central Edo government. Due to tight government control over revenue, farmers had to work extremely hard to survive. The village headman's responsibility was to manage the revenue, coordinate with the local magistrate of the central government, and host traveling officials and their company. Because of these responsibilities, Tachibana-ya was wealthy, equipped with a large house.

Later, Ryokan reflected on the days of his youth:

What I remember of my youth:
reading books in an empty room,
pouring oil into the lamp,
savoring a long winter night.

From age eleven, Eizo was sent to stay with relatives in the village of Jizodo about nine miles away from home. As planned, during this time he studied Chinese and Japanese literature at a private school run by the Confucian scholar Shiyo Omori.

Eizo's father, Jirozaemon, wanting to retire from the village headman's position, made Eizo a village headman-in-training at age sixteen. But Eizo abruptly escaped, becoming a novice at a Zen temple in the adjacent village of Amaze.

The cause of Eizo's dropping out is unclear. Legend has it that he was deeply distressed after witnessing the decapitation of a criminal. According to another legend, Eizo miserably failed to mediate a dispute between the samurai government's regional chief magistrate and the villagers because he was too honest, lacked diplomacy, and offended both parties. At any rate, Eizo proved himself to be unfit to

be part of the rigidly established feudal society and sought out inner wisdom and freedom instead.

At age eighteen, Eizo was ordained by Genjo Haryo, abbot of the Kosho Temple, where he had taken refuge, and was given his monk name Daigu Ryokan (Great Fool, Good and Broad).

Four years later, Zen master Tainin Kokusen—Haryo’s teacher and a long-term abbot of the Entsu Monastery—visited the Kosho Temple to conduct an ordination ceremony. Struck with Kokusen’s humble yet accomplished personality, Ryokan became his student and accompanied the fifty-six-year-old master to the Entsu Monastery in Bitchu Province (in present-day Okayama Prefecture) in the western region of Honshu Island. The monastery, located atop an isolated round mountain in the village of Tamashima, was relatively small. Kokusen had, however, established practice guidelines for the Entsu Monastery and maintained strict communal practice, thereby elevating it to one of the top-ranking dharma training centers of the Soto School.

Kokusen diligently followed the Zen practice established by Eihei Dogen, who emphasized that practice is itself enlightenment and prescribed minute details of daily monastic procedure. Ryokan joined other monks and participated in the rigorous daily schedule from early in the morning till late at night—meditating, cleaning the monastery compound, cutting firewood, cooking, serving, listening to dharma talks, receiving personal instruction from the master, reading scriptures and Zen texts, and takuhatsu. According to Ryokan, his master’s teaching style was “pulling boulders and carrying soil.” It seems that much of Kokusen’s instruction was given through the silent joint endeavor of meditation and labor.

Later, Ryokan wrote a poem ([figure 9](#)) about his training period:

Since residing in the Entsu Monastery,
how many winters and springs have passed?
In the neighboring town of one thousand houses,
did I know a single person?
When my robe got filthy, I washed it with my hands.
When food was gone, I went to the city to beg.
What I learned from biographies of accomplished monks:

remaining poor suits us seekers well.

Here Ryokan reveals his understanding that the desire for fame, status, and comfort contradicts the search for genuine freedom. He must have heard Dogen's words: "Those who practice the way must be poor."

In 1790, at age thirty-three, Ryokan received a ritual stick with an approval verse from Kokusen. (This verse includes *good*, *fool*, and *broad*, which represent ideographs in Ryokan's name.)

My good fool, your way is broad.
Freely living as you are, who can grasp you?
Now I entrust you with a mountain-shaped stick.
Wherever there is a wall, there is a place to doze.

Thus Ryokan completed his Zen training. Then he left to further his practice as a monk, wandering the world like clouds and water. Kokusen passed away the following year.

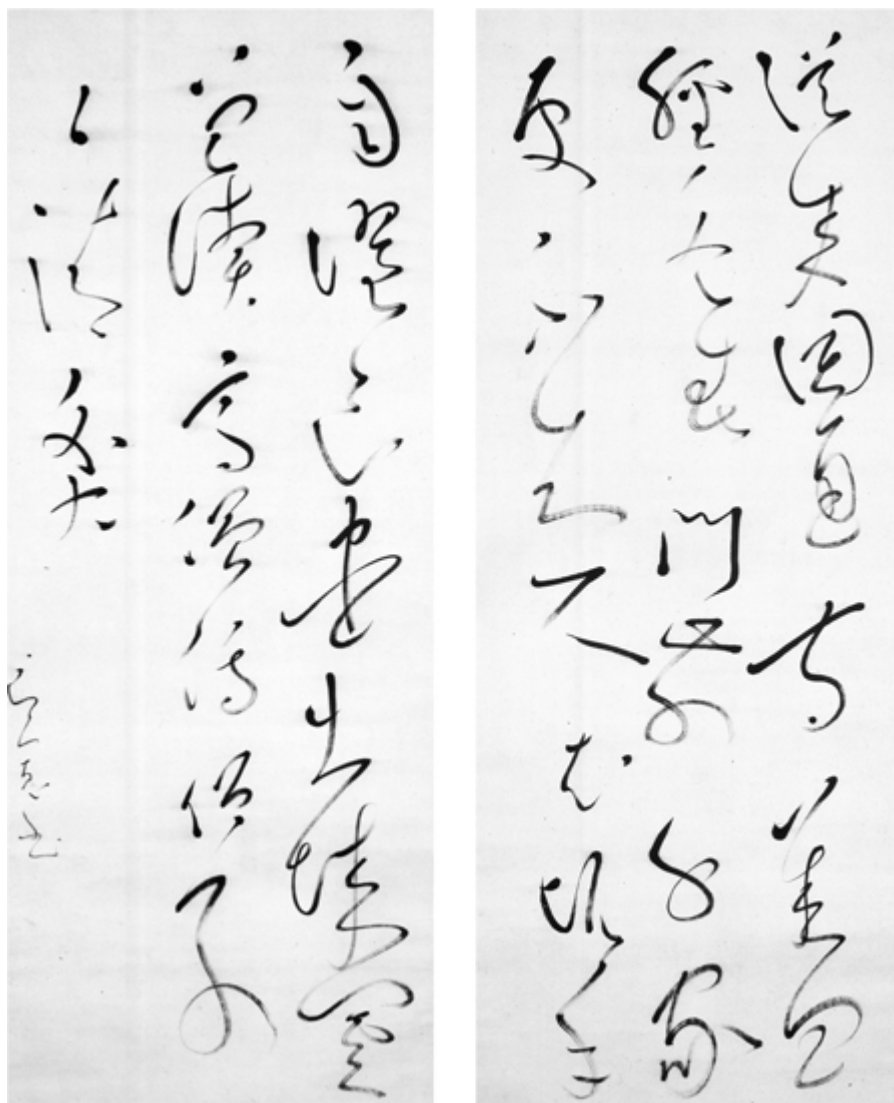


Figure 9. "Since residing in the Entsu Monastery . . ."

In his pilgrimages, begging for food and lodging, Ryokan managed to make his way to many temples and monasteries on Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku Islands. (See ["Maps of Sites Related to Ryokan."](#)) But he became disappointed with the severe lack of genuine spirit among Buddhists in his time.

All Japanese people were legally obliged to register at their Buddhist temples in order to prove that they were not believers in Christianity, which was strictly forbidden. Those not authorized by temples were stripped of their civil rights and regarded as nonhumans. People were not allowed to change their temples. Priests received ample income by performing funerals and memorial

ceremonies for the temples' member families. Temples owned farmlands, from which they collected rice crop revenue through the labor of farmers fixed to the lands. Monks were supposed to be celibate, but many of them were unofficially married. Ryokan saw these phenomena as signs of corruption and a decline of the dharma, writing in the poem titled "Monks":

You who have left the household,
I hear you shouting day and night.
In order to satisfy your mouths and stomachs,
you run around all your lives.

Particularly criticizing Buddhists' sectarianism, Ryokan wrote this as part of a long poem, "Discourse":

The ancestral way becomes fainter day by day.
Teachers can't see past the name of their school;
students enable their teachers' narrow-mindedness.
They are glued to each other,
unwilling to change.
If the purpose of the dharma were to establish schools,
sages would have done so long ago.
Now that people have declared their schools,
whom on earth should I join?

A Poet Emerges

Because many poets, including his father, lived in his birthplace of Izumosaki, Ryokan had been writing haiku from a very young age. Later, on a portrait somebody painted of Basho (1644–1694), who established the poetic genre of haiku, Ryokan wrote a poem:

There was no Basho before Basho.
There will be no Basho after Basho.
Ah, Basho, Basho!
Thousands of years later still adored.

During his Wandering Period, from age thirty-three to thirty-nine, Ryokan wrote some tanka poems, which reflected his study of classical poetry, including those in *Kokin Shu*—an early-tenth-century imperial anthology written during a time of flourishing court culture in the capital city of Kyoto. Ryokan memorized the ancient poems, adopting phrases or lines into his own compositions.

In his later life, he wrote a Chinese-style poem:

Forty years ago when I was wandering,
I struggled to paint a tiger, but it didn't even look like a cat!
Reflecting back, as I release my grip on the cliff's edge,
I am still Eizo of my young days.

We don't know what this obscure pilgrim was doing on his journey, except for a brief unpublished narrative by Banjo Kondo, a scholar in Japanese literature who lived in Edo:

Many years ago, when I visited Tosa Province [on Shikoku Island], a shower poured down before I got to the city [of Takamatsu]. I saw a shabby-looking hut at the foot of a mountain off the road. I went there and asked for lodging. A monk with a thin, pale face welcomed me to his fireplace but said that he had no food or bedding. After speaking a few words, this monk kept silent, not meditating, sleeping, or chanting. When I spoke to him, he only smiled. Thinking he had a mental problem, I lay down at the fireplace. When I awoke, I saw him lying next to me asleep, using one of his arms as a pillow.

It was raining too hard for me to go out, so I asked him to let me stay longer. He said I could stay as long as I wanted. I was so glad. At midday he mixed barley powder with hot water for us to eat.

I looked around and noticed that he had no possessions to speak of except for a small wooden image of Buddha and two books placed on a small table. One of the books was a Chinese classical *Zhuangzi* [Chuang-tsu]. Inside was a sheet of paper on which a poem was written in cursive

style, perhaps by this monk. As I had not studied Chinese-style poetry, I could not tell whether or not the poem was good. But the calligraphy was astoundingly splendid.

So I took out two folding fans of my paintings from my backpack basket and asked him to add calligraphy to them—one of plum blossoms with a bush warbler and the other of Mount Fuji. He immediately did so. I forgot what he wrote but remember that at the end of his calligraphy on Mount Fuji, he signed it this way: “Who says this? Written by Ryokan from Echigo Province.”

In 1778, the year before Ryokan joined the Entsu Monastery, his younger brother Yushi Yamamoto became the village headman in training. In 1783 their mother, Hideko, died. In 1786 their father, Inan, retired and Yushi took over.

In 1795 Inan left a death poem, as was customary for a literary figure, and drowned himself in the Katsura River in Kyoto. Nobody knows why. According to legend, he was an advocate of the restoration of imperial rule and wrote a manuscript titled “Record of Heavenly Truth.” But under the tight oppression of the Shogun government, he was unable to publish or distribute it.

After being notified of his father’s death, Ryokan went to Kyoto and participated in a forty-nine-day memorial service. After that he went southeast, climbed up Mount Koya—the head temple compound of the esoteric Shingon (Mantra) School—and wrote a tanka in memory of his father:

In an old temple
deep in Mount Koya,
Kii Province,
I listen to raindrops
falling from a cedar tree.

Then Ryokan went back to his home province of Echigo.

Longing for the Ancient

Ryokan lived in several places near his hometown, Izumosaki. Then, around 1796, at about the age of thirty-nine, he settled in a thatch-roofed hut on a steep hill of Mount Kugami about twelve miles northeast of the port village. This mountain, the name of which means “province top,” stands high in Echigo. It houses the Kokujo Temple, a large ancient Shingon School temple. There is another Shingon sanctuary called the Hongaku Temple down below on the western slope. It is here that Ryokan was invited to live in a one-room hermitage called Five Scoop Hut behind the temple. This hut had been built some time earlier for a monk who helped rebuild the temple on an allowance of five small scoops of rice per day.

Ryokan lived in this humble abode for twenty years, from age thirty-nine to fifty-nine. This period may be seen as the Mature Period of his poetry and calligraphy. From an acquaintance, he borrowed a copy of *Ten Thousand Leaves Anthology* (Man'yo Shu)—the earliest, most extensive collection of Japanese poetry from ancient times, compiled in the mid-eighth century before the development of highly refined court poetry. In following these naive and straightforward expressions of sentiments by people of all backgrounds, Ryokan established his own poetic voice. His study of classical calligraphic masterpieces by Huaisu and Tofu Ono also helped him find his unique style of calligraphy.

On a copy of Dogen's essay called “Continuous Practice,” part of the *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (Shobo Genzo), Ryokan added his own note. He offered incense and read it in the severely cold, bamboo-cracking winter. From this note, we can assume that he kept on reading Dogen's writings. From his compilation of stories of Chinese Zen practitioners in “Continuous Practice,” Dogen concluded:

Do not run around after fame and gain in the realm of sound and form. Not running around is the continuous practice transmitted from person to person by buddha ancestors. Mature hermits, beginning hermits, one person, half a person, I ask you to throw away myriad matters and conditions and continuously practice the continuous practice of buddha ancestors.

Ryokan ponders in his Chinese-style poem titled “Reading the *Words of Eihei Dogen*”:

On a somber spring evening around midnight,
snow sludge sprinkled the bamboo in the garden.
I wanted so desperately to ease my loneliness.
My hand reached behind me for the *Words of Eihei Dogen*
beneath the open window at my desk.
I offered incense, lit a lamp, and quietly read.
Body and mind dropping away is simply the upright truth.
In one thousand postures, ten thousand appearances, a dragon
toys with the pearl.
Beyond ordinary thinking the precious tiger is captured.
Thus, Dogen’s writings reflect the Buddha’s teaching.

I remember the old days when I lived at the Entsu Monastery
and my late teacher lectured on the *True Dharma Eye*.
It was then that I had a breakthrough.
I was granted permission to read it and studied it intimately.
Until then I had depended solely on my own limited
understanding.
Soon after, I left my teacher and became a wanderer.
What is my relationship to Dogen?
Everywhere I went, I devotedly practiced the true dharma eye.
How many years have passed since then?
Forgetting myself, I returned home and now live in leisure.

I take this book and examine it quietly.
Its tone is not in line with the teachings of others.
No one has asked whether it is a jade or a pebble.
For five hundred years, it’s been covered with dust
simply because no one has an eye for dharma.
For whom was all of his eloquence expounded?
Longing for ancient times and grieving for the present, my heart
is exhausted.

As I was sitting by the lamp one evening, my tears wouldn’t
stop.

They soaked into the book of the ancient buddha Eihei.
In the morning an old man living nearby came to my thatch hut.
He asked me why the book was damp.
I wanted to speak but didn't, as I was embarrassed.
Deeply distressed, I could not explain.
I dropped my head for a while before finding my words.
"Last night's rain drenched my basket of books."

The writings of Dogen were forgotten for four hundred years after his death. Ryokan might not have been fully aware of it, but there had been a resurgence in Dogen studies since the seventeenth century, in which his teacher Kokusen played a part. A copy of "Continuous Practice," which Ryokan had borrowed from a friend, was perhaps printed and distributed by his dharma brother Gento Sokuchu, successor in the abbacy of the Entsu Monastery. Sokuchu later became the head of the Soto School as fiftieth abbot of the Eihei Monastery, restoring the monastic buildings according to its founder Dogen's specifications. Sokuchu was instrumental in the initial publication of the entire *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye* (Shobo Genzo), comprising ninety-five essays. (This publication took place in 1816, nine years after Sokuchu's death and fifteen years before Ryokan's death. Ryokan had no way to acquire a copy of this monumental text by Dogen, but perhaps he had access to the handwritten copies of several independently distributed essays from this book.)

Ryokan wanted to follow Dogen's instructions to the letter. Realizing no one else wished to wholeheartedly practice the ancient master's way, Ryokan felt helpless. He expressed his grief in the conclusion of the Chinese-style poem "Discourse" quoted earlier:

When a great house is about to crumble,
a stick cannot keep it from falling.
Unable to sleep on a clear night,
I toss in bed, chanting this poem.

Ryokan outlined in the poem "Discourse," quoted earlier, the transmission of the Zen teaching from Shakyamuni Buddha through

Bodhidharma and Tiantong Rujing of China to his Japanese successor Dogen. But it was not in Ryokan's nature to remain in a monastery, lead a community of monks, and try to reform the system. He saw himself as ill-suited to preach, organize, or lead. He was self-disciplined but inwardly inclined. He wrote:

I don't tell the murky world
to turn pure.
I purify myself
and check my reflection
in the water of the valley brook.

Withdrawing from the practicing community, he walked alone through mountains and villages, ringing a belled staff and chanting a verse of a sutra at each house. He treated everyone with respect and loving-kindness. Whether people offered him food, ignored him, or harshly drove him away, he was determined to remain true to his path as a monk:

Never
will I taint
my renounced life
for the Buddha,
for the dharma.

There was at least one person who practiced Zen seriously with Ryokan—his boyhood friend Saichi Miwa. Unfortunately, he died young. Hearing the sad news, Ryokan wrote:

Ah, the single lay practitioner
who studied with me for twenty years,
one who penetrated what is within—
No others are worthy of receiving the dharma.

In the meantime, while Ryokan was living at the Five Scoop Hut, his brother Yushi gradually failed to manage the headman's office, as well as the family household. As a result of his losing a court dispute with the Kyo-ya family of Amaze Village, the entire property

of the Yamamoto family was confiscated by the government in 1810, and Yushi was expelled from his home village. After the death of his wife, Yasu, a grief-stricken Yushi became a monk in 1811. Ryokan unconditionally loved his haiku-poet sibling. At times they saw and wrote to each other. Once Ryokan wrote to him a tanka titled "At Izumosaki Peninsula":

Morning and evening
I gazed at
Sado Island,
remembering
our deceased mother.

Lazy and Foolish

In 1826, at age fifty-nine, Ryokan moved to the forested compound of Otogo (Youngest Child God) Shinto Shrine, located below the Five Scoop Hut on Mount Kugami. It had become increasingly difficult for him to make trips through the deep snow to villages from the Five Scoop Hut. His two-room hut at the shrine stood at the side of its tiny thatch-roofed sanctuary. He lived there for ten years. This era can be regarded as the Later Period in his poetry and calligraphy. Despite his struggles with malnourishment and sickness, he was quite prolific. It was during this time that he wrote:

When young, I learned literature but was too lazy to become a scholar.
Still young, I practiced Zen, but I never transmitted the dharma.
Now I live in a hermitage and guard a Shinto shrine.
I feel like half a shrine keeper and half a monk.

Perhaps he not only kept the shrine clean but also followed some Shinto procedures such as making offerings and reciting prayers in exchange for his residency. During this time, Buddhism and Shintoism were by and large integrated. Ryokan therefore probably

had no problem being a Shinto shrine keeper and a Zen monk at the same time.

He said in another poem:

In my hometown, there are two brothers
with contrary characters.
One is clever and eloquent,
the other foolish and silent.
The foolish one
seems to have all the time in the world.
The clever one
is always busy depleting his life.

Apparently Ryokan had affinity with the one who was stupid and silent. Although there is no evidence that he ever used one of his Buddhist names, Daigu (Great Fool), he was indeed a great fool—having practiced Zen intensively and being well versed in literature but showing no trace of his achievement. *Anecdotes of Zen Master Ryokan* says:

On an autumn evening, Ryokan was playing hide-and-seek with children in the village as usual. Ryokan hid himself in newly stacked straw. At dusk the children went home, leaving Ryokan behind.

Early next morning, a farmer pulled some straw out from the stack and found Ryokan inside.

The farmer said, “Oh, Rev. Ryokan!”

Ryokan said, “*Shhhh!* The children may catch me.”

In another account from the same collection:

A messenger delivered a letter to Ryokan and waited for his reply. Ryokan went to another room but did not return for a long time. When the messenger heard laughter coming from the room, he took a peek inside and discovered Ryokan spinning his iron bowl on the end of the handle of his ceremonial whisk. Every time the bowl fell, Ryokan laughed.

Annoyed, the messenger reminded Ryokan of the reply he was awaiting. Ryokan came to and gave his written reply. The messenger went back, telling his master the story. Amused, the master opened Ryokan's reply:

When I turn
my iron bowl, it goes
round and round.

Many of the hilarious stories included in *Anecdotes* portray Ryokan as overly trusting, forgetful, whimsical, and naive. We could also see him as absurd, filthy, and disgusting. Yet he was always loving and joyful. These colorful episodes, along with his splendid artistry and devoted Zen practice, made Ryokan extremely popular after his death.

Although they may be exaggerated, some of the stories are often imbued with subtle teachings. While some may in the end simply be funny, how to interpret the stories is up to us. In any case, it is clear that Ryokan's sincere Zen practice brought him to a point of nondiscrimination and nonattachment.

Renouncing the world, renouncing the body, I have become a
person of leisure.
Keeping company with the moon and blossoms, I spend my
remaining life.
So clear—rain, clouds, and spirit.
I am awake, as are all things in the world.

Ironically, his diligence merged with total relaxation; his wisdom converged with seeming stupidity. Through his lack of possessions, comfort, and regular human contact, he found contentment in each moment. He expresses this in this tanka:

As long as I don't aim,
I won't miss.
With the catalpa bow,
I shoot an arrow
toward the open sky.

Because he did not strive to become free, he was always free from attainment—even from attainment of freedom.

Love in Ryokan's Final Years

Although I wish to come
on a cane
to see you,
this sickly body
will not let me.

In 1826, at age sixty-nine, Ryokan had become too weak to collect firewood, fetch water, and walk the distance to the villages for takuhatsu. Motoemon Kimura, a student and influential supporter of his, invited Ryokan to move into his house in Shimazaki, a section of Washima Village, on the plain in the midpoint between Izumosaki and Mount Kugami. Ryokan accepted his invitation but insisted on living in the former firewood shed behind the garden. It was there that he spent the last five years of his life. This era can be regarded as the Final Period in his poetry and calligraphy.

One day in the following year, Teishin—a young nun—came to meet him. She left a tanka for him, as he was away:

You who play in the buddha way
bouncing a ball
endlessly
must be the one.
Is it your dharma?

Ryokan sent a return poem:

Try bouncing a ball.
One, two, three, four, five,
six, seven, eight, nine, ten.
You end at ten
and start again.

Later, they met. Teishin, already an accomplished poet, passionately wrote:

The joy of
meeting you
in this way—
I wonder if it is a dream
I have not awoken from.

Ryokan responded reflectively and rather impersonally:

In the dream world
there is dozing.
Further within,
speaking and dreaming
of the dream as it is.

Thus, Teishin became Ryokan's student. She was twenty-nine years old to his seventy. Originally from a samurai family, she had married a physician but was widowed after five years. A few years later she was ordained by Zen master Taizen of the Toun Temple. She was living in the Emma Shrine in Fukushima, six miles southeast of Shimazaki, across the wide Shinano River, when she met Ryokan.

She asked Ryokan a great many questions about buddha dharma. He was delighted to speak about what he had learned through his lifetime practice and study.

In *Dew on the Lotus* (Hachisu no Tsuyu)—Teishin's memoir of Ryokan and a collection of his poems—she wrote the phrase, "In late evening speaking intimately on dharma," as a short preface to the following poem by him:

My arms are chilly
under my white robe.
On an autumn evening,
the moon shines over
the center of the sky.

One day when she was in her shrine, a friend told her that Ryokan was visiting the nearby castle town of Yoita. She went to see him and learned that he was leaving the following day. People gathered to converse with him and bid him farewell. Teishin said to Ryokan, "Your complexion is dark and your robe is dark, so from now on I will call you a crow." Laughing, he said, "That suits me well," and wrote the following poem:

Tomorrow
I will fly away
to who knows where,
as someone has made me
a crow.

Then Teishin wrote:

Oh mountain crow,
if you are going home,
please bring along
a young crow,
even one with fragile wings.

Ryokan, a shabby old monk, must have been utterly flattered by this young, beautiful woman's subtle yet public confession of love. The notion of love between a nun and a monk would be dangerous anywhere, particularly in their old-fashioned rural society. In his return poem, he told her jokingly to slow down:

I wish I could
bring you along,
but what would become of us
if people started
to talk?

Teishin did not give in but pushed further:

A kite is a kite,
a sparrow is a sparrow,

a heron is a heron.
A crow with a crow—
who should suspect?

Meetings of master and disciple were rather infrequent. Teishin and Ryokan's relationship developed slowly, sublimated by way of their poetry. One spring, Ryokan suggested that she should come back and see him after the bush clover bloomed. Teishin could not stand such a long separation, so she arrived early, offering an apology:

Waiting
for the autumn bush clover to bloom,
I pushed through
the dew-covered summer grass
to visit you.

Ryokan accepted her excuse with the following verse:

Too long to wait
for the autumn bush clover to bloom,
you have pushed through
the dew-covered summer grass.
Oh, here you are!

Another time, Teishin came to Ryokan's backyard hut to find only a lotus blossom in a water-filled jar at his door. So she left a note:

I got here
but no one was home.
How splendid!
A fragrant lotus
guarding your hut.

Ryokan sent a poem in response:

No one here
to greet you.

Just think of me,
looking at the lotus blossom
in a small jar.

Ryokan's love of Teishin deepened. While suffering from deteriorating health and persistent diarrhea, he became eager to see her. He wrote:

Have you forgotten?
Has the path disappeared?
These days
I have spent waiting and waiting,
but you have not yet arrived.

When she came after the snow melted, he wrote:

More precious than
jewels and gold
spread under the sky—
your visit
at the beginning of spring.

In the winter of 1830, upon falling severely ill, Ryokan retreated into his hermitage and stopped receiving visitors. In response to Teishin's note wishing his recovery, Ryokan wrote:

As soon as spring
has arrived
full as a drawn bow,
please visit this grass hut.
I do want to see you.

At the year's end, Ryokan fell into critical condition. Teishin rushed to see him. Overjoyed, he wrote:

When? When?
You, whom I have been
eagerly awaiting,

are finally here.

What else is there to want?

Teishin, Motoemon, and brother Yushi tended to him. Ryokan passed away on the sixth day of the first month, 1831, at the age of seventy-four.

One of Ryokan's death poems summarizes his lifelong loneliness, openness, and reconciliation with transiency:

Showing its back
and showing its front,
a falling maple leaf.

WANDERING PERIOD



1790–1796 (*age 33–39*)

New pond.
No sound of a frog
jumping in.



Short of breath,
a sardine vender
makes his way to the top.

*At a place called Ako I slept in the
Tenjin Shrine forest. Chilling storm.*

Mountain storm!
Don't blow so hard
at night on my journey.
I sleep on one sleeve
of my white robe.



*The following day I arrived in a
place called Karatsu. This evening
I also had no place to stay.*

Did I expect this?
Tonight again
I sleep outdoors,
tamping down weeds
alongside the road.



On the evening of the harvest moon

Together with others
I view the moon
above the capital city,
but I long for
the feel of the land.



On a grass pillow,
my journey's lodging
changes night by night.
Dreams of my village
remain.



If anyone
is going to my hometown,
send a message that
I have passed
Omi Province.



MATURE PERIOD



1796–1816 (age 39–59)

While living at Five Scoop Hut on Mount Kugami

Arriving here at this village,
peach blossoms
in full bloom.
Red petals reflect
on the river.

TAKUHATSU

On the first day of the eighth month
I walk into town, begging.
White clouds follow my high-spirited steps.
Autumn wind rattles the jade rings on my stick.
A thousand gates open at dawn.
Bamboo and plantains paint themselves in front of my eyes.
House to house, east to west, I beg for food;
wine shop, fish market, it's all the same.
Looking directly at the world,
one crushes hell's mountain of swords.
Walking slowly evaporates the boiling cauldron.
Long ago the prince of King Shuddodana taught
and the Golden Ascetic intimately received transmission.
It has been more than two thousand seven hundred years.
I, too, am a child of the Shakya family.
One robe, one bowl—totally clear:
Old man Vimalakirti once said,
“Give and receive food as you would give and receive dharma.”
I take his point.
Practicing solidly, who will not reach the year of the donkey?



See and realize
that this world
is not permanent.
Neither late nor early flowers
will remain.

Since I left the household,
throwing myself into the world as it is,
I have erased all dates.
Yesterday I lived on a green mountain;
today I play in town.
More than one hundred pieces patch my robe.
A single bowl knows no years.
Leaning on my walking stick, I sing into the clear night;
laying out a straw mat, I sleep under the moon.
Who says I don't count?
This body of mine is just this.



The cloud-covered sky
is all open.
The heart of takuhatsu
as it is—
a gift from heaven.

In town I finish begging for food.
Content, I carry the cloth bag,
wondering which place to call home.
Could that be my hut near the white cloud?

A bent ritual stick

Don't liken it to a tile or pebble.
Don't even compare it to a jewel.
It is as rare as a black dragon's horn,
as vital as a blue elephant's trunk.
It supports a dharma talk on an autumn evening,
keeps me company as I sleep on a spring afternoon.
Although useless for dusting,
it purifies the heart of the way.



Past has passed away.
Future has not arrived.
Present does not remain.
Nothing is reliable; everything must change.
You hold on to letters and names in vain,
forcing yourself to believe in them.
Stop chasing new knowledge.
Leave old views behind.
Study the essential
and then see through it.
When there is nothing left to see through,
then you will know your mistaken views.

Great is the robe of liberation,
a formless field of benefaction.
Buddhas have authentically transmitted it.
Ancestors have intimately received it.
Beyond wide, beyond narrow,
beyond cloth, beyond threads;
maintain it thus,
then you are called a keeper of the robe.



What was right yesterday
is wrong today.
In what is right today,
how do you know it was not wrong yesterday?
There is no right or wrong,
no predicting gain or loss.
Unable to change their tune,
those who are foolish glue down bridges of a lute.
Those who are wise get to the source
but keep wandering about for long.
Only when you are neither wise nor foolish
can you be called one who has attained the way.

You see the moon by pointing your finger.
You recognize the finger by the moon.
The moon and the finger
are not different, not the same.
In order to guide a beginner,
this analogy is temporarily used.
When you have realized this,
there is no moon, no finger.

When Zhaozhou asks, "Yes?" I say, "Yes."

When he asks, "No?" I say, "No."

When you ask, "Yes?" I say nothing.

When you ask, "No?" I say nothing.

When you ask, "How is it so?"

still I say nothing.



If someone asks
about the mind of this monk,
say it is no more than
a passage of wind
in the vast sky.

In an autumn field,
hundreds of grasses
burst into bloom.
Kneeling down,
a male deer cries.

Reflection on leaving the household

I came to the mountain
to avoid hearing
the sound of waves.
Lonesome now in another way—
wind in the pine forest.

Autumn advances
and I become
a bit sad
closing the gate
to my hut.

Back in Echigo Province,
I am no longer
used to the climate here.
Cold is increasingly
harsh on my skin.

MONKS

You shaved your heads and became monks.
Now you beg for food and nourish your original aspiration.
If you see yourselves in this way,
how can you not realize and awaken?
You who have left the household,
I hear you shouting day and night.
In order to satisfy your mouths and stomachs,
you run around all of your lives.
Those who wear white robes without way-seeking mind
can still be forgiven.
Those who have left the household without way-seeking mind,
how can you purify your defilement?
Cutting off the hair of attachment in the three realms,
you wear the robe that destroys ideas of gain.
The journey from the realm of human obligations
to the realm beyond doing is not an idle thing.
When I walk in the world, I see
men and women performing their tasks.
If they don't weave, what can we wear?
If they don't farm, how can we eat?
Now you call yourselves children of Shakyamuni,
although you have no practice and no enlightenment.
Wastefully you spend donations from your supporters
without reflecting upon your three types of actions.
You talk big,
but your habits never change.
You deceive old women in the countryside
by appearing serious.
You regard yourselves as able people.
Ah, when will you awaken?
Even when approached by a herd of nursing tigresses,

don't stumble onto the path of fame and gain.
An ocean cannot clean
the slightest thought of fame and gain.
What have your teachers been doing
since they ordained you?
Offering incense,
they pray to buddhas and deities
to solidify your aspiration for the way.
How can you not betray them
the way you are today?
The three realms are like a guesthouse.
Human life resembles a dewdrop.
Time for practice easily evaporates;
true dharma is rare to encounter.
One must sustain vigorous effort.
Do not wait for encouragement
from one after another.
I offer you harsh warnings
not for my own pleasure.
Starting now, think deeply.
Change your selfish ways.
Those in later generations,
let go of your fear!



Impermanent and swift,
transformed in an instant,
a youthful face will not remain.
Black yarn on the head turns into white threads;
the backbone bends like a bow.
Skin wrinkles like waves over a stormy visage;
cicadas inside the ears chirp all night.
Blossoms fly endlessly over the eyes.
Standing up you take a deep long sigh.
You walk on your cane absentmindedly
or ponder pleasures of younger days
accompanied by today's worry.
How pitiful, you who regret your old age!
You are like a branch covered in frost.
Among those who have received life in the three realms,
who can avoid arriving here?
Moment to moment nothing stays,
how long are youthful and mature ages?
The four elements decay day by day;
body and mind dwindle night by night.
Once you lie in sickness,
you don't part from the pillow for a long time.
Even if you keep talking aloud,
what can your talking accomplish?
The six roots have nothing to depend upon
if one breath is cut off.
Your relatives wail into your face.
Your wife and children sadden while rubbing your back.
They call you, but you won't answer.
They cry for you, but you won't know.
Total darkness is the path in the Yellow Spring.
Dazed, you walk alone.



SONG OF *CHUGEN*

My parents departed long ago.
How often I grieve in sadness!
I had only two aunts left:
my mother's elder sister, Myogo, and younger sister, Myoshin.
Last year Myoshin died in the fifth month.
Myogo was alive at the time of *chugen* but
became a resident of the Nine Fields this year.
Last year I went to Kyoto and sobbed.
This year I moved to the shore of a lake and a river.
My grief multiplies as I move through space and seasons.
My wandering south and north stops for a while;
here and there on the valley stream, I pick floating weeds.
In the distance, I visualize the Ki River bank.
Monks perform an *urabon* ceremony after cleaning the temple.
The chanting of sad voices resounds to the red banners.
Then a cool breeze arrives;
cleansing and darkening showers merge with the dust.
Rain over, plantain shadow under the leaning sun—
the spirit of my father appears before me.
After the ceremony I return to the monks' quarters,
making a silent dedication for his liberation:
"Spirit, do not stay sunk forever.
Quickly prepare a boat and cross to the other shore."



DISCOURSE

Customs become diluted year after year.
Both the noble and the common decline.
The human mind grows fragile with time;
the ancestral way becomes fainter day by day.
Teachers can't see past the name of their school;
students enable their teachers' narrow-mindedness.
They are glued to each other,
unwilling to change.
If the purpose of the dharma were to establish schools,
sages would have done so long ago.
Now that people have declared their schools,
whom on earth should I join?
Everyone, shut your mouth
and listen!
A discourse should have a beginning.
Let me begin with the one on Vulture Peak.
The Buddha is the *deva* of devas.
Who can criticize him?
Five hundred years after the Buddha passed away,
people gathered two or three volumes of his teaching.
Bodhisattva Nagarjuna came to the world
and wrote a treatise explaining emptiness.
He said he was simply called to do so.
Who is right and who is wrong?
The Baime Monastery was first founded
after the buddha dharma moved eastward.
Our master Bodhidharma came from afar.
It was then that all teachings found their source.
Zen flourished in Great Tang.
Never had it been so magnificent.
Guiding the assembly and correcting the crowd,

each teacher was a lion in dharma.
Although sudden and gradual teachings emerged,
there were not yet Southern and Northern Schools.
In the later dynasty of Song,
the white jewel began to be marred.
The Five Schools exposed their spearheads;
the Eight Schools competed with one another.
Their influences spread far and wide,
impossible to stop.
Then came our Eihei Dogen,
a true pioneer in the ancestral domain.
He carried Taibo's seal of approval.
His voice resounded like thunder throughout this country.
Vigorous was his work of spreading dharma,
so vigorous that it overshadowed
other dragons and elephants.
Even hermits did not miss being illuminated.
He also guided those living on remote islands.
He eliminated what should be eliminated,
offered what should be offered.
Since the master left this land of Shinto deities,
how many years have passed?
Thornbushes grow around high halls,
fragrant flowers wither in the weeds.
Vulgar songs fill the days.
Who will expound the luminous teaching?
Ah, I, a humble one,
have encountered this era.
When a great house is about to crumble,
a stick cannot keep it from falling.
Unable to sleep on a clear night,
I toss in bed, chanting this poem.



Day by day, day by day, and day by day,
quietly in the company of children I live.
In my sleeves, tiny embroidered balls, two or three.
Useless, intoxicated, in this peaceful spring.

Rain frogs
disappear into
my scrubbing of the pot.

Blue sky, cold geese honk.
On a bare mountain, tree leaves flutter.
At dusk in the village, smoke billows from every house.
Alone with my empty bowl, I head home.

In the evening of a thousand peaks, I close my eyes.
Among humans, myriad thoughts are trivial.
Serenely I sit on the mat.
In solitude I face an open window.
The incense has burned out and a dark night is long.
Dew is thick; my robe is thin.
Emerging from *samadhi*, I walk in the garden.
The moon has risen over the highest peak.



Rags upon rags,
tatter is my life.

I pluck my food on a country path.

My hut is buried in a tangle of weeds.

Looking at the moon, I hum all night;
deluded by blossoms, I forget to return.

Since leaving the monastery,
what a fool I have become!

One thousand peaks merge with frozen clouds;
ten thousand paths have no human trace.
Day by day just facing the wall,
at times I hear snow drift over the window.

Autumn evening,
a monk stands
listening to crickets—
faraway village
buried in mist.

The sound of maple leaves falling
in this mountain village
makes it hard to tell
a rainy day
from one that is not.

Out breath
and in breath—
know that they are
proof that the world
is inexhaustible.

Water does not go,
moon does not come.
And yet,
how pure its reflection
on the waves!

A statue of Buddha
in *parinirvana*
and Ryokan
next to each other.
Pillows side by side.



On an evening journey

Time passes, spring to autumn;
the temple is quiet, white dew dense.
Though crickets near the window run their looms,
they do not add one thread for this poor monk.

I lodge in an abandoned temple,
my only company a single lamp.
Who will dry these traveling clothes?
Singing soothes me,
rainfall rings in my ears.
I stay awake with my pillow high until dawn.



A walk in Izumosaki with Rev. Tenge on an autumn day

Human life is like a blade of grass
floating downstream.

How can one respond to such a situation?

I live this way not without reason.

Waving my belled staff, I parted from my family;
raising my hands, I bade the town farewell.

I keep repairing my patched robe.

Who knows how many springs this begging bowl has seen?

I happen to love the quietude of a grass hut.

Two of a similar spirit have met;

who can distinguish host from guest?

The wind high, the pine a thousand feet tall,
chrysanthemum blossoms chilly with frost—

with our hands holding what is outside the secular world,
we forget everything on this serene shore.



*I carried my begging bowl and arrived in the city of Niigata,
where I saw Elder Ugan giving a dharma discourse at a
layperson's house. I wrote this verse to him.*

Your talk is like chopping cheap dog meat
and selling it as a slice of sheep.

I am as stinky as you are.

May the pleasure of your company not go away!



After staying at the Koju Hall on an autumn night, I lean over a balcony rail overlooking early morning.

Last night I arrived at this monastery.
Here I clean myself and bow to the statue of the Buddha
on a blue lotus.
Lamplight illuminates a quiet room.
The myriad phenomena are altogether serene.
After the bell sounds the fifth night period,
a voice chants in harmony with the trickling fountain.
The eastern direction starts to glow,
clear and serene, the sky after rain.
Cool autumn in the eighth, ninth months:
fresh air polishes the mountains and rivers.
The remaining mist gathers in the dark valley.
Sun rises on layered ridges,
a treasure tower in the empty sky.
A golden pagoda hangs on twigs.
Splashing streams pour from steep cliffs.
Waves lap up against the sky.
Passengers in the distance walk to the ferry port.
A number of boats compete to cross.
How misty the shore!
Cedar and cypress greens look delicious.
Long ago I valued what is rare
and traveled all over to find it.
Then I visited this place
whose beauty is beyond words.
Who picked the Koju world and
put it in front of me?
Looking at its manifestation in this world,
I write a single verse.
I have no choice but to leave.
Thoughts of the long journey occupy my mind.
Among humans there is waxing and waning.
How can I make plans to return?

I keep wandering empty-mindedly, attempting to go,
poised with my ringed stick.



Rain and sleet
soaked
my walking robe.
Kind women dry it,
passing it from hand to hand.

On the second day of the twelfth month, I received offerings of sweet potatoes, apricots, and so on from Shukumon. I responded with this poem.

I climbed the mountain and collected a bundle of firewood.
The sun was already low upon my return.
You had left an offering
on the shelf below the window.
Apricots in a bag, potatoes wrapped in straw,
a piece of paper with your name.
From day to day there is no delicacy,
although mountain greens and radishes happen to grow.
Quickly I cooked them in the pot and added soybean paste.
The food felt like candy for my starving stomach.
After three bowls, I was finally satisfied.
The only regret is that you, the poet, did not bring a jar of sake.
I kept two-tenths of the feast and stored it in the kitchen.
Rubbing my stomach, I walk around and think of the rest of your
offering.
Buddha's enlightenment ceremony is six days away.
With what shall I express my gratitude?
I usually receive few offerings;
most of them are from the next temple or city.
Things cost tenfold at the end of the year.
Even if I would spend all I have, it would not be enough to fill the
basket.
Fortunately, this year with your gift, dear friend,
I can make an offering to the old man from India.
Let me see what I should offer:
Apricots with tea, sweet potatoes served warm.



My hand holds a cane made of rabbit horn.
My body is wrapped with a robe of flowers in the sky.
My feet are clad in shoes made of tortoise hair.
My lips chant a poem of no sound.

Upon hearing that Yukinori passed away

Life, less than a hundred years,
floats like a boat midstream.
You and I shared causal conditions.
How can I help not pondering them?
Long ago with a few friends,
we walked along a narrow creek,
leisurely discussing literature.
You and I studied in our master's school.
We walked side by side like two carriages,
sat on the same straw mat,
but wind took us away
and waves kept us apart.
You aspired to excel in fame and gain;
I longed for the Golden Sorcerer.
You went to the eastern capital;
I stayed in a western province.
The western seaside was not my hometown.
How could I stay there for long?
I moved back to my old village,
lived in mist above the clouds.
Finally, I found a hut made of a bundle of grass
and have lived on Kugami Peak ever since.
Our old garden is not as it was.
We all change—noble and common alike.
I asked someone about you, but
he just pointed to the cemetery on the hill.
Sobbing for some time,
I could not speak.
You were my peer in the same school;
now you are under the moss of the Yellow Spring.
We used to exchange joyous words;
now one is alive and the other dead.
How vast are the three realms!
Indeed, the six paths are difficult to comprehend.

I told it to you thus and walked down the road,
swinging my ringed staff as smoke from houses curled above.
Upstanding pine trees dot both sides of the road.
Temple buildings line up in the clouds.
Willow trees swing their green flags.
Peach blossoms scatter on a silver saddle.
The town is in festivity,
people coming and going in streets.
I look but don't know them.
How can I not hide?



I don't regard my life
as insufficient.
Inside the brushwood gate
there is a moon;
there are flowers.

Were there someone
in the world
who feels as I feel,
we would talk all night
in this grass hut.

Pass the mountain
where white clouds
linger,
I will share with you
a song about young bracken.

For you who
rarely visit,
though you have already arrived,
may the early evening storm
not blow so hard!



My lodging is
bamboo poles
and a straw mat screen.
Kindly throw down
a cup of cheap sake.

I sit facing you, but you utter no words.
Although no words, feelings abound.
Books and their cases are scattered near the bed.
Rain patters on plum blossoms outside the bamboo screen.

Two of us
brush painting in turn;
autumn night.

Take care now;
I am going for
takuhatsu.
You stay in this
borrowed hut.

We promised
to see each other
when rice is transplanted.
Already autumn wind is blowing
through yellow leaves.



Upon the death of Shigenori Yamada

Is it a dream
or is it real?
How will I know?
Parting from you,
my mind is at a loss.



Although from the beginning
I knew
the world is impermanent,
not a moment passes
when my sleeves are dry.

On a pitch-dark
night road
I get lost
watching the moon
set behind the faraway mountain.

After sunset, a breeze blew.
Awakened, I walked around.
A child knelt before me
and handed me your five-ideograph lines.
Your poem, alive as waves,
flowing as a fountain,
quickly healed my stagnant sickness.
I savored it, like a sorcerer's elixir.
I offered incense, poring over it again and again.
Since then, it has stayed with me.

A stick of incense stands by my pillow.
When the lantern dims, I pour some oil.
I add more clothes as the night deepens.
If you don't mind my bare hospitality,
please keep wandering in.

On my portrait

We meet and we part,
Coming and going—hearts like passing clouds.
Except for the marks of a frosty-hair brush,
human traces are hard to find.



Hair disheveled, ears sticking out.
Patched robe half torn like cloud and mist.
At dusk in town on my way home,
children flock from east and west.

With little desire, all is sufficient;
with grabbing mind, myriad things are confined.
Light vegetables satisfy my hunger.
A patched robe wraps my body.
Walking alone, I am accompanied by deer.
Singing aloud, I play with village children.
I wash my ears in a creek under the boulder,
delighted by pine trees on a ridge.

Hakama too short, jacket too long,
freely and quietly I pass the time.
Children on the street notice me,
clapping their hands and singing bouncing-ball songs.



Autumn mountain,
maple leaves have fallen.
What should I
bring to children
for a souvenir?

I play pulling weeds with children,
having fun with one, another, and another.
After my companions have gone,
a bright moon overwhelms the naked autumn night.

All four seasons have the moon,
and yet we admire it especially in autumn.
The mountain is high and the water clear.
In the sky of myriad miles, a round mirror flies.
Forgetting both light and object—who is this?
Heaven is high and high; autumn is chill and chill.
Holding the treasure stick, I circle the belly of the mountain.
All directions are solitary and serene.
I gaze as the moon gushes glowing light.
Who in this evening looks at it?
What does it illuminate?
How many autumns come and go?
Looking at the moon, facing the moon, there is no end.
Transmission on Vulture Peak and Caoxi's pointing—
wondrous teachings under the moon.
The night is already deep when I chant under the moon,
settling on the river while dew grows thick.
Whose pond reflects the most luminescence?
Which wanderer has the heart of fall?
Don't you see Jiangxi,
who on the night of moon gazing
recognized that Puyuan alone had passed beyond forms?
Don't you also hear
Yaoshan's famous laughter under the moon
resounding through the village from his solitary peak?
These are stories in ancient times that led seekers of the way
to look toward waxing and waning with empty minds.
Having carried much longing for the ancient,
I also face the moon, robe moistened by evening dew.



Under the clear sky around midnight,
I take a cane and go out the gate.
Under the entangled vines,
how winding this pebble road is!
Birds nesting in trees chirp on branches;
black monkeys howl beside me.
Viewing the Amitabha Hall from afar,
in broad spirit I climb up.
Old pine trees are ten thousand feet high;
fresh water spouts from the spring.
Wind above blows ceaselessly;
a solitary moon floats in the dark blue.
Leaning on the balcony railing,
I am a crane flying over the clouds.

LATER PERIOD



1816–1826 (age 59–69)

Residing in a hut at the Otogo Shinto Shrine on Mount Kugami

A break-in

A thief took the *han* and futon from the thatch-roofed room.

Who could blame him?

All night I sit alone under the quiet window—
rain sprinkles sparsely on the bamboo grove.



My dear begging bowl
is so lovely.
Since leaving the household
I have held it close
on my wrist in the morning,
on my palm in the evening.
But since I left it somewhere today,
I don't know how to stand or sit.
My mind scattered,
I search restlessly—
on the ground where valley toads crawl,
and in the dew-laden field,
with or without my cane,
to the place where heaven and earth merge.
Then somebody brings it, saying,
“Here is your begging bowl.”
Is he a human being,
a message from above,
or a dream on a pitch-dark night?

When I picked violets
on the roadside,
I left my begging bowl
behind—
that very begging bowl.

In my bowl
I mingle
violets and dandelions,
wishing to offer them
to the buddhas in the three worlds.



Since leaving the household,
my whereabouts depend upon cloud and mist—
one moment mingling with woodcutters and fishermen,
next moment flocking with children.
How could I be satisfied by the glory of kings and lords?
To be a sorcerer is not my wish.
Wherever I visit, I stay.
It does not have to be Bodhidharma's Mount Song.
Renewing my practice day by day,
I resolve to reach complete serenity.



Before listening to the way, do not fail to wash your ears.
Otherwise it will be impossible to listen clearly.

What is washing your ears?

Do not hold on to your view.

If you cling to it even a little bit,
you will lose your way.

What is similar to you but wrong, you regard as right.

What is different from you but right, you regard as wrong.

You begin with ideas of right and wrong.

But the way is not so.

Seeking answers with closed ears is

like trying to touch the ocean bottom with a pole.

In one thousand years,
how can I
live up to
the true path
even for a single day?

A good old cane
of unknown age,
hard as iron from the mystic Three Mountains,
straight as a string on the harp—
crossing water, it touches the bottom;
climbing a mountain, it reaches the peak.
This morning when I threw it down the stairs,
it turned into a dragon and flew to the clouds.



On a quiet evening in my thatch-roofed hut,
alone I play a lute with no string.
Its melody enters wind and cloud,
mingles deeply with a flowing stream,
fills out the dark valley,
blows through the vast forest, then disappears.
Other than those who hear emptiness,
who will capture this rare sound?

TO THE FLOWER THIEF

You caught a glimpse of
plum blossoms,
like viewing a sliver moon,
at a temple beyond
the ragged rocky slope.
You grew a wish to
pull out the entire tree
and bring it home.
A misty spring day,
you couldn't keep it off your mind.
When evening came,
you left your small village full of ducks,
crossed the large field of
pampas grass,
and passed along
the bird-chirping shore
toward the rough mountain
filled with straight standing trees.
Quietly, you approached
your destination from a rocky path.
When you stood on the fence,
someone saw you and
yelled out "Thief!"
People in the temple
hit the bells,
noisy as a storm on a mountain,
like trying to push down bamboo
with leaves thick with dewdrops.
They called out and surrounded you,
leaving no way to escape.
So you were called a flower thief.

Since then it's been many years.
I wonder if you have been
rubbing your long beard,
in your low reed-roof hut
on a small mountain,
in this blossom-viewing month.

Many years like new jewels,
have passed
through my fingers.
Flower thief,
a thing of the past.



How could we discuss
this and that
without knowing
the whole world is
reflected in a single pearl?

Wait for the light
of the rising moon,
then leave
as stinging chestnut shells are scattered
on the mountain path.

I stand up and look,
sit down and look,
waiting for you
who promised to visit
so we could view maple leaves
at my hut.

Evening by evening rain falls.
Morning by morning frost spreads.
If wind happens to blow,
maple leaves will fall.
If maple leaves fall, what shall I do?
Maple leaves that never fall
are unheard of even in the ancient world of gods.
Thinking about it,
all I can do is to
break off a branch.

Maple leaves
drained of their color
on one side of my garden—
who are they waiting for?
Frost has started to spread.

In the mountain shade,
water in the moss
drips between rocks.
I feel a glimmer
of clarity.

In town
there are sounds
of flutes and drums.
But in this deep mountain
only a pine rustles.

Today I, too,
will join the blossom watchers
on a spring mountain.



This morning I will fetch water,
cut firewood,
and pick herbs
during a break
in this autumn shower.

My abode is
in winter seclusion
on this white mountain in Echigo.
No trace of humans
coming or going.

In reality,
as in dreams,
I expect no visitor—
but old age
keeps calling.

The path is hidden
by snow,
invisible,
but thoughts of you
lead me onward.



How can I
sustain my life?
So far,
winter this year
has been brutal.

For no particular reason
my heart is stirred,
unable to sleep
knowing that tomorrow
is the beginning of the year.

Snow falling,
blown by wind.
Wind blows,
carrying snow.
Even in spring,
drawn like a catalpa bow,
cuckoos have not yet sung.
I don't go out in the field to pick young herbs,
only stay in my grass hut,
continuing to count the days.
Already the middle of the second month
has passed.

I see by the moon that
spring has moved past
its midpoint.
I have not yet emerged
to pick young herbs from the field.



Upon getting up from sickness in late spring

The grass hut is tightly closed, west of the stone forest.

In solitude a single pillow faces the hill.

Rising from sickness, I lean on a cane and stand by the river.

Countless peach petals flow downstream.

“Cuckoos
keep chirping,”
so they say,
but I can no longer hear
their songs.

Feeling slightly well when autumn comes

Not yet disappeared
like a dewdrop
on a blade of grass,
I am still in this floating world,
moon in the morning.

I don't know about
other countries,
but in this country
there is a horrendous spirit
called Imo, god of smallpox
who comes around
every seven years and
tortures young children.
This year is
exceptionally disastrous.
If we keep counting
the number of coffins
sent off for cremation,
our thumbs will sprain.
The few who survive
are left with demon faces.
Those who have children are panicked.
Recently, a couple sent me an offering
for the funeral I had conducted
for their infant boy.
I was told that their next youngest
had also died
of the same disease
the day before yesterday.
So I sent them this poem:

Smoke
disappears into
the heavenly sky.
A child's image
is all that remains.

*That evening I chanted the Lotus Sutra and dedicated the merit
to all the deceased children known and unknown, asking
Amitabha Buddha to guide them to paradise.*

Please guide
all fallen children
to the Buddha's
dharma lotus-
blossom seat.



Imagining I am someone who has lost a child

Seeing other people's
children play,
I stand in the garden,
shedding
bottomless tears.

Imagining I am someone who has lost a child

If I die
of this unbearable grief,
I may run into my child
on the way
to another world.

A cuckoo
hops, weeping,
behind the leaves.
Does it see the world
so sad?

If I had known
how sorrowful this world is,
I would have become
grass or a tree
in a deep mountain!

FINAL PERIOD



1826–1831 (age 69–74)

Residing at a hut in the backyard of the Kimura family in Shimazaki

Written in my hut on a snowy evening

Reflecting over seventy years,
I am tired of judging right from wrong.
Faint traces of a path trodden in deep night snow.
A stick of incense under the rickety window.

PREPARING FOR THE NEW YEAR'S DAY

People make
elaborate offerings to the Buddha.
In my hut
I dedicate
a painted rice cake.



Around the tenth day of the second month, I visited the foot of Mount Magi, where Arinori used to live. Seeing the abandoned plum tree, I reflected on our friendship.

In the past,
we used to catch falling plum blossoms
in sake cups.
Now they vainly
fall to the ground.



Noisy kids
lack coordination to catch
early fireflies.

Pushing the pole—
a rice-straw-carrying boat launches
toward the sliver moon.

Wind bell chimes
three or four feet
away from the bamboo.

No one home.
Fallen pine needles
scattered at the door.

Again
I sneak into your garden
to eat aronia berries.
(Please keep yourself hidden
until I go away!)

Maidens' hands wearily
transplant rice
in a mountain field.
Even their singing
sounds sad.

If someone asks
where I live,
say,
“The farthest end of
the heavenly river shore.”



MELON

I scoop and eat,
tear and eat,
break and eat,
then afterward
I keep it near my mouth.

The persimmon picker's
testicles look frozen
in the autumn wind.

Hat in the sky,
sandals on the ground,
straw raincoat flown afar,
my body
the only memento.

Walking to a neighbor's bath,
clogs clatter loudly—
winter moon.

My hand is
tired of fanning,
but where should I set it?

Summer night
transforms to daybreak.
I count fleas.

The ink-dyed
sleeves of my robe—
if only they were broad enough
to shelter
the poor.

Autumn bush clovers,
eulalias,
violets, dandelions,
silk tree blossoms,
plantains, morning glories,
bonesets,
asters, dayflowers, and
daylilies,
which I planted in my garden—
as I nurtured them with care,
watering and shading morning to night,
people loved them,
and so did I.
Then a strong storm happened to rage
on the evening of the twenty-fifth day
of the fifth month.
My plants were hit by the rain,
crushed
into hundreds and thousands of pieces.
I felt so sad
but had no one to blame.
One hundred grasses
I planted
at my hut
depend upon
the will of the wind.

Crimson—
the seven treasures!
I hold up a gift of
pomegranates
with both hands.



Come again,
if you don't mind
pushing your way through
dewy eulalia blossoms
to reach this twig-bound hut.

How did you wriggle
your way
into my dream path
through such deep snow
on the night mountain?

Children,
let's go to the mountain
to view violets.
If they scatter away tomorrow,
what can we do?

Won't you sing?
I will get up and dance.
How can I sleep
with the timeless
moon this evening?

Dancing the *bon* dance,
with a hand towel
I hide my age.



If my life
is still together,
I will occupy this hut
under the tree
next summer.

Written and sent to Yushi

Standing or sitting
in this grass hut,
there is no escaping
the thought that
I haven't seen you recently.



Seeing you,
my dear,
intoxicates me.
What regret shall I leave behind
in this world?



Old man's bent body—
like a snow-laden stalk of bamboo
buried in cold.

If I say it
it's easy,
yet my diarrhea stomach
is indeed
hard to bear.

Father and Mother,
be there
in paradise
in case I join you
today.

If you follow
the original vow of
Amitabha Buddha,
you will no longer be lost
at the crossroads.



What legacy shall I
leave behind?
Flowers in spring.
Cuckoos in summer.
Maple leaves in autumn.



If people ask about
Ryokan's death poem,
tell them it was
"Homage to
Amitabha Buddha."

Farewell—
I will jump
onto a lotus leaf.
Let people call me
a frog!



ANECDOTES



In the middle of summer, Ryokan announced: "I will air the entire Buddhist canon in the Five Scoop Hut. Please come and see."

The villagers went to the hut, but there were no books of the canon; only Ryokan, lying naked. On his drum-like belly was written the phrase "Entire canon." The villagers were dumbfounded.



Ryokan loved smoking, but he kept losing the tobacco cases he had been given. Someone helped him by tying a tobacco case to his obi sash with a string six feet long.

One day, an old woman said to him, "Would you like some tobacco?"

He said, "Mine is following me."

Not understanding his words, the old woman looked behind Ryokan. He had been dragging the tobacco case with the string.



Someone said, "It's exciting to find money on the street."

Hearing it, Ryokan threw his own money onto the street and picked it up. He did not enjoy it at all. Suspecting that the man had tricked him, Ryokan kept on throwing money, but eventually he could not find where the money had gone. He searched for it everywhere until, finally, he found the money and was overjoyed. Then, he said to himself, "That man didn't trick me after all."



Ryokan would sometimes play a *go* game, betting money. Many of his opponents let him win. Then he would say, "I have too much money. I don't know where to put it." Or he said, "People worry about being short of money. I suffer from having too much."



Ryokan was once invited to a tea ceremony. Several guests were supposed to share one bowl of thick tea. Ryokan swallowed the entire contents of the bowl before noticing that the guest next to him was waiting. He spit some of the tea back into the bowl and passed it to the next guest. Having no choice, the guest finished the tea while chanting "Homage to Amitabha Buddha."



This could have been at the same tea ceremony. Ryokan picked snot out of his nose and indiscreetly tried to set it on the right side of his seat. The guest on his right pulled his sleeve and cautioned him not to do that. Ryokan then tried to set it on his left, and the guest on the left side pulled his sleeve. Having no place to put his snot, he put it back into his nose.



When Ryokan was living in the Five Scoop Hut on Mount Kugami, a bamboo shoot grew to the ceiling in the bathroom. Ryokan lit a candle and burned a hole through which the bamboo shoot could grow. But the fire spread and burned the entire bathroom.



On nice days, Ryokan would often pick lice out of his clothes in the sun. He would have dozens of lice crawling on paper and sunbathing. But at dusk, he would put them back under his robe.



One night a thief broke into the Five Scoop Hut on Mount Kugami. Finding nothing else to steal, the thief tried to pull out the mat Ryokan was sleeping on. Ryokan turned over and let the thief take the mat.



Bundai Suzuki, a friend, visited Ryokan. Ryokan wanted to serve lunch but had no extra chopsticks or bowl. So he went to a crematory and served rice and soup in the discarded bowls that had been offered to the deceased. Bundai was appalled, but Ryokan casually ate the meal as though nothing peculiar had happened.



On an autumn evening, Ryokan took a stroll in a potato field. Thinking he was a potato thief, the farmer ambushed him, beat him on the head, tied him up, and hung him on a pine tree. Ryokan then said, "It's me. I am not stealing your potatoes." Recognizing his voice, the farmer brought him down and apologized. Ryokan left while chanting:

One who strikes
and one who is struck
are equally
like a dewdrop, a flash.
Understand this.



Ryokan visited a man in Kariwa County who said, "I don't want any more status or property. There is nothing that makes me feel unfulfilled. One thing, however, goes against my wish."

"What is it?" asked Ryokan.

"I want to live till I am one hundred years old. But I don't think this can be achieved," said the man disappointedly.

"It's easy," said Ryokan, smiling. "If you visualize that you have lived one hundred years, you are already one hundred years old."



Once Ryokan passed Kirigamine Peak on the back of a horse pulled by a man. After Ryokan got off, the man said, "That will be sixteen pennies," but Ryokan had only one penny in his wallet. So he

apologized and said, “My name is Ryokan. I don’t have money today. Instead of the sixteen pennies, you can beat me sixteen times.”

Recognizing Ryokan, the man didn’t want to beat him. Instead he said, “Then do some calligraphy for me for your ride.” He took Ryokan to his house and got him to write a poem.



Someone sent Ryokan a stack of paper and said, “Please put down something you like best.”

Ryokan painted a red pepper on all the sheets of paper and said, “This is what I like best.”



Ryokan went begging at a house around Sone Village. The man of the house was witty and thought of a trick to get Ryokan’s calligraphy. When he served the midday meal, he set a brush and paper at the side of the meal tray and said, “Rev. Ryokan. People say your calligraphy is getting worse and worse. What a shame! You need to practice some.”

Ryokan listened to him without words. After the meal, he took up the brush and wrote: “Medicine is bitter. Sugar is sweet.”



Ryokan would write down “Mine” or “Really mine” on his straw hat and other belongings. In the Kera family, there is still a copy of *Journal of Dream Playing* (Muyu Shu) by Chomei Kamo, an essayist who lived in the twelfth to thirteenth century. On the book, Ryokan wrote “Really mine.”



Ryokan once borrowed a copy of the ancient Buddhist commentary *Abhidharma Kosha* from the Man’en Temple in Izumosaki. When he returned it, he brought blocks of tofu with a poem:

Geese and ducks
have flown away,
abandoning me.
How happy I am that
tofu has no wings!



One day Ryokan cut a chrysanthemum stalk from someone's garden in Yamada Town. Finding him out, the owner drew a painting of Ryokan as a flower thief and said to him, "Only if you write a poem on this painting will I forgive you." Ryokan took a brush and wrote:

May the figure of
Monk Ryokan
running away with a flower
this morning
remain for generations to come.



Tadakiyo Makino, the lord of Nagaoka clan, wanted to visit Ryokan in his hut. Hearing about it, villagers rushed to Ryokan's hut in his absence and cleaned the hut and pulled off all the weeds. Seeing the beautifully prepared garden upon his return, Ryokan sighed and said, "As you have taken away all the weeds, the insects that sang until last night may not sing here anymore."

The lord arrived soon after, but Ryokan did not utter a word. Responding to the lord's gracious invitation to visit his castle, Ryokan wrote a poem:

The more you burn
fallen leaves,
the more leaves the wind will blow.

The lord asked Ryokan to take good care of himself.



One day Ryokan visited Hikoemon Hoshi of Takenomori. After supper, Ryokan and Hikoemon went to the neighbor's house to take a bath. Upon returning, Ryokan was ready to leave and picked up a cane that was standing at the entrance. Hikoemon's child said, "Rev. Ryokan, that's our cane."

Ryokan said, "No, it's mine," and walked off holding on to the cane. After some time, he returned and said, "I've got the wrong cane." Again he got himself ready to leave.

People in the house insisted: "Rev. Ryokan. It's late at night. Please stay with us. Please write something." But they did not have paper. Hikoemon went to the village head's house to borrow some paper.

Ryokan looked around and found an old funeral money book. He picked it up, wrote a poem in the book, and left.

Whom shall I tell
how pathetic
this old body is,
going home in darkness,
leaving my cane behind?



Hosai Shimada, a Confucian scholar and calligrapher from Edo, visited Echigo Province and lectured on Confucius's *Analects*. Someone in the audience was laughing hard. Hosai looked. It was Ryokan.

Another time, Hosai lectured on another text, criticizing Shakyamuni Buddha by using Buddhist technical terms. That night he heard someone calling him from above his pillow. It was a monk, who said, "The buddha dharma you preached is rotten. It's time for you to stop confusing people." Hosai realized that it was Ryokan.



A few years after Hosai returned to Edo, Ryokan went to see him. Hosai was again lecturing. Seeing Ryokan in a dirty robe and broken hat, a student of Hosai's scolded him and drove him away. Hearing

about it after his lecture, Hosai said, "It must be Zen master Ryokan, a great monk from Echigo. Go get him." The student caught up with him, apologized for his rudeness, and asked him to return. Ryokan just said, "Good, good," and walked away.



Ryokan had great respect for farming. In the seasons of plowing and harvesting, he reflected on the farmers' labor to turn one grain of rice into many. He would draw paintings of farmers at work and then post them in his hut, offering incense and flowers. One of his waka poems says:

These days
rice seedlings are transplanted.
In my hut
I paint farmers and
bow with offerings.



Mount Kugami, where Ryokan's Five Scoop Hut was situated, was a part of Murakami Domain. Lord Naito, the ruler of Murakami, loved hunting and continued doing so with no regard for the difficulties of the farmers who cleared out the path for his entourage.

One day when Ryokan went down the mountain, villagers were busy cleaning the road. When he asked them why, one of the farmers whispered: "Our lord is going hunting. As this is harvest season, we have no time to do this. But it's the lord's order and nothing can be done."

Hearing it, Ryokan said, "All right. Let me try to stop his hunting." He then asked the farmer to build a signpost. Ryokan wrote a poem:

On a short day
there is no time
to dry the rice stalks.
Keep the harvesting field
in your heart.

“Harvesting field” (*kariba*) can also be read as hunting field. Soon the lord came in a palanquin and read this poem. He ordered the palanquin turned around and went away. He did not go hunting again.

RYOKAN'S POETIC FORMS

Ryokan wrote poetry in three genres—haiku, waka, and *kanshi*.

Haiku is the shortest form of Japanese poetry, initiated mainly by Basho, who was Ryokan's predecessor by one hundred years. It consists of seventeen syllables arranged in three phrases: five, seven, five.

Waka is an ancient form of Japanese poetry. It includes short poems called tanka and longer poems called *choka*. Tanka, which is the more common form of waka, consists of thirty-one syllables: five, seven, five, seven, seven. Choka is a repetition of five-and-seven-syllable pairs, ending with seven and seven syllables. It is often followed by an envoi tanka, called *hanka*.

Kanshi is a Chinese-style poem written in ideographs, read in Japanese pronunciation. An ideograph is a symbol commonly used in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Though the meaning is by and large universal in these regions, the pronunciations are different according to the language people speak. Ideographs are handwritten, usually in formal, semicursive, or cursive scripts.

The complete collection of Ryokan's poems compiled by Toshiro Tanikawa in three separate books contains 107 haiku, 1,350 waka, and 483 kanshi.

Japanese poetry has three levels of expression: the poem itself, the script of the syllables, and the aesthetics of the calligraphy, including column breaks. (Column breaks are similar to line breaks in English, but "lines" are mostly written vertically in Japanese, hence the difference in terminology.)

Each word or syllable can be represented by an ideographic or phonetic character or set of characters.

A phonetic letter, or kana, can be classified as a standard script called *hiragana* or an ideographic phonetic called *man'yo gana*. A standard kana has one letter for one syllable. Man'yo gana, which was created in ancient times when the *Ten Thousand Leaves*

Anthology (Man'yo Shu) was compiled, uses an ideograph to represent a sound, disregarding the meaning of the ideograph. In this script, several ideographs can represent the same sound. (The standard kana evolved from man'yo gana, so sometimes a certain character shares the same shape and can be seen as either standard kana or man'yo gana.) Basho, Buson, and Issa used a mixture of ideographs, representing meaning, as well as man'yo gana and standard kana, which are pure phonetics.

Ryokan often used man'yo gana exclusively for haiku and waka. The man'yo gana characters tend to have more strokes than standard phonetic letters. As man'yo gana is an archaic, elaborate, and complicated script, it requires readers to solve it like a puzzle. Furthermore, Ryokan's brushwork is written in extremely cursive calligraphy (at times idiosyncratically so), making it even more difficult to decode.

When haiku or tanka are written in calligraphy, they often appear as a single column. When translated into another language, though, it is helpful to have haiku typeset in three lines and tanka in five, in order to show the original phrase breaks. Because phrase breaks are self-evident in the Japanese language, the artist has the freedom to make random column breaks in calligraphy. This creates a discrepancy and tension between the poetic breaks and visual shift of the columns, samples of which you will see in the following illustrations of Ryokan's calligraphy.

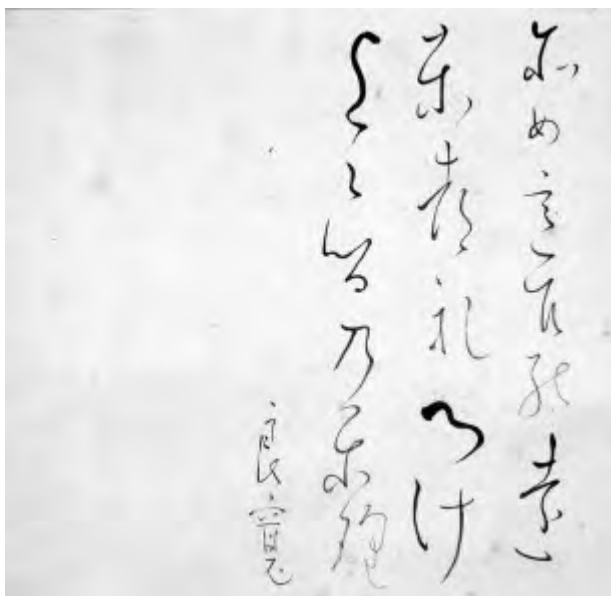


Figure 10. "Tell me the news . . ."

Here in [figure 10](#) is a haiku that I have translated as follows:

Tell me the news
from Sumeru,
evening geese.

I would like to take you through the process of identifying and translating the symbols in his calligraphy. The following is the typeset version of the symbols:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 与 | 東 | 所 |
| 々 | 都 | 女 |
| 留 | 禮 | 意 |
| 乃 | 川 | 呂 |
| 閑 | 計 | 能 |
| 理 | | 遠 |

This text is read from the top down, right column to left. At the end, Ryokan signed his name (良寛).

These typefaces are based on the formal styles of Chinese script. Ryokan, however, wrote them in cursive script. You may notice that the written and typed symbols look so different that it is difficult to recognize that they are even the same characters. So let me show you the different ways of writing the first five characters, *so*, *me*, *i*, *ro*, and *no*, starting with typescript on the left, then moving through formal script, two samples of semicursive script, and cursive script.

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 所 | 所 | 所 | 所 | 所 |
| 女 | 女 | 女 | 女 | 女 |
| 意 | 意 | 意 | 意 | 意 |
| 呂 | 呂 | 呂 | 呂 | 呂 |
| 能 | 能 | 能 | 能 | 能 |

Formatted in a horizontal way, the verse would look like this:

所女意呂能遠
 東都禮川計
 与々留乃閑理

By definition, each ideograph has its own meaning. In other words, each symbol represents a word. But in man'yo gana, each symbol reads merely as a sound:

so me i ro no o
 to tsu re tsu ke
 yo yo ru no ka ri

As you can see, if we were to mechanically romanize the original writing, there would be no capitalization or punctuation. When this verse is typeset in five-seven-five-syllable format:

所女意呂能
遠東都禮川計与
々留乃閑理

so me i ro no
o to tsu re tsu ke yo
yo ru no ka ri

If we convert the above intricate man'yo gana script to the standard kana script, it will have the same sound but look like this:

そめいろの
をとつれつけよ
よるのかり

In the classical style of writing, certain consonants are known as voiceless consonants, such as *k*, *t*, or *ts*. These can either be used as voiceless or be voiced as *g*, *d*, or *z*. To indicate the difference, a voiced or soft-sound indicator—which is a pair of small dots at the upper right side of the letter—can be added to convert the voiceless consonant to a voiced consonant. (For example, *ka* turns into *ga*.) If we make these conversions explicit, the expected soft sounds in the poem will be written like this:

そめいろの
をとつれつけよ
よるのかり

so me i ro no
o to zu re tsu ge yo,
yo ru no ka ri

For Japanese people, it is rather difficult to read a text written solely in phonetics. Most writers favor a mixed format of ideographs and phonetics. A text can be written in various combinations of phonetic and ideographic characters. For example, this verse can be written in several ways:

そめいろの
をとづれつげよ
夜の雁

蘇迷盧の
をとづれつげよ
夜の雁

蘇迷盧の
訪れつげよ
夜の雁

As you can see in this example, a writer of the Japanese language has multiple choices for the combination of symbols to represent a sentence of the same sounds and meanings. Each particular combination has its own unique visual, literary, and psychological implications. Choosing such a combination is an important part of poetic creativity.

Perhaps Japanese is the only language in the world that has this feature. Although in his earlier days Ryokan used a mixture of ideographs and phonetics, he often chose man'yo gana, particularly in later times.

Visually speaking, the standard phonetics are plain, soft, and fluid, while ideographs are intricate, rich, and dense with associations. As man'yo gana is an ideographic phonetic, it embodies both characteristics.

This poem can be put into roman script with word divisions according to parts of speech, with an addition of punctuation and capitalization:

Someiro no
otozure tsugeyo,
yuru no kari.

When translated word by word, we get the following:

Sumeru, of,

visit (also meaning “news”), announce (in an imperative form),
evening, geese

As presented above, here is how I have translated this verse:

Tell me the news
from Sumeru,
evening geese.

“Someiro” is a Japanese transliteration of the Chinese word *Sumilu*, which is again a transliteration of *Sumeru* in Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language. It is the name of a mythological mountain that is regarded as the center of the world, where the heavenly deity Indra abides. Thus, *Someiro* roughly means “heaven.”

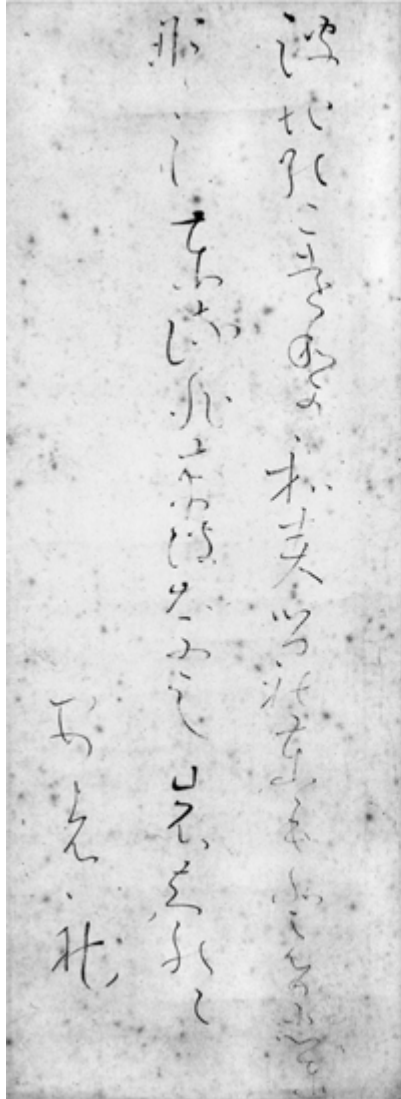
Ryokan wrote this haiku in response to the death poem of his father, Inan:

I will post
a sign for
Mount Sumeru
as a memory
after I pass.

Ryokan wanted the goose to inform him of his father’s whereabouts in heaven. It seems, however, that *someiro* has another meaning, “dye colors” (染め色), which is used as a pun. So this poem can also mean:

Tell me of the visit of
autumn’s dye colors,
evening geese.

The appreciation of the calligraphic beauty of this piece ([figure 10](#)) may include noticing the rhythmic changes of the thickness of the lines, the subtle swaying of the columns, and the extradelicate ligatures among the last three characters. At first glance, one may be struck by the disproportionately expansive negative space on the left side.



波地能己遠和可和春留禮東毛登留悲東
 那之東流非東波奈之者知能己
 安者禮

Figure 11. “My dear begging bowl . . .”

In figure 11 is an example of Ryokan’s tanka “My dear begging bowl . . .” This writing can be typeset as shown above.

The horizontal format of this man’yo gana, its standard phonetics, and its romanization are as follows:

波地能己遠和可和春留禮東毛登留悲東
 那之東流非東波奈之者知能己安者禮
 はちのこをわかかわするれともとるひと
 なしとるひとはなしはちのこあはれ

ha chi no ko wo wa ka wa su ru re to mo to ru hi to
na shi to ru hi to ha na shi ha chi no ko a ha re

The standard phonetics can be put in the format of five, seven, five, seven, five syllables with voiced sounds and romanization dividing the parts of speech, plus euphonic changes. Also, one missing syllable is added.

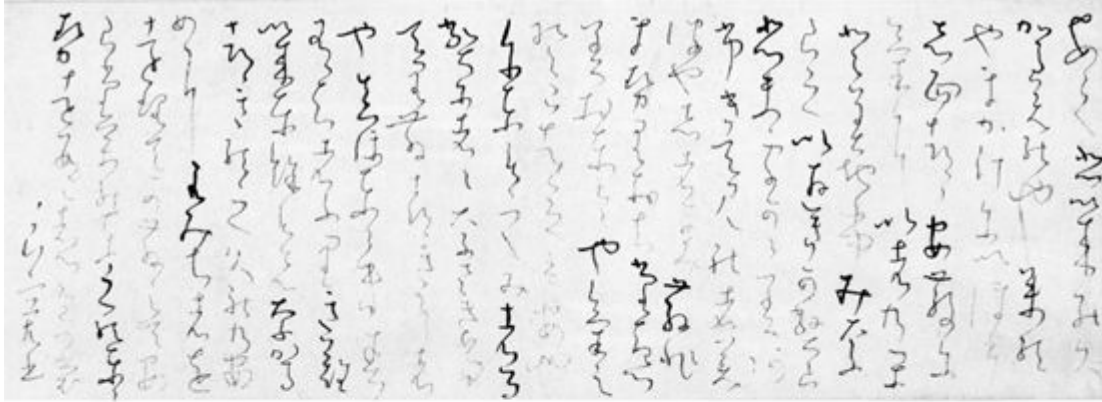
はちのこを
わがわするれども
とるひとなし
とるひとはなし
はちのこあはれ

Hachi no ko wo
wa ga wasure domo
toru hito nashi
toru hito wa nashi
hachi no ko aware.

Here is the poem translated word by word and then put in a poetic form in English:

bowl child,
I, forgot, but,
take (it), person, (there is) no,
take (it), person, (there is) no,
bowl child, pitiful
My dear begging bowl—
I left it behind
but no one took it.
No one would take it.
My poor begging bowl.

This tanka is written in two extrathin, leisurely zigzagging lines, accented by a few wet brush marks. The last column says “Written by Ryokan.”



勢遠數己志川留可裳
 良堂萬能東之能安
 遠理天可散之天安
 女耳毛美知者遠安
 都幾東餘毛志奈駕安
 幾知者不里幾難
 有真保東々幾春
 也里散都幾耳者當
 天爾者々奈左幾當
 弊爾東毛之美者留當
 爾東毛之美者留當
 楚己遠左也氣之
 美於東左也氣之
 末勢里於知堂起川
 波也志者可美散非
 布幾天見禮者美阿良
 悲末處可々美阿良
 良之以遊幾可弊良
 登美地布美奈
 氣耳以者乃閑爾
 志面都々安散爾
 也末加計爾以保
 駕美能也萬能久
 安之美能幾能久

Figure 12. "Broad-based Mount Kugami . . ."

In [figure 12](#) is an example of a choka, or a long waka.

When put in a horizontal format, converted into standard phonetics, and romanized, we have the following:

安之悲幾能久
駕美能也萬能
也末加計爾以保利
志面都々安散爾
氣耳以者乃閑
登美地布美奈
良之以遊幾可弊良
悲末處可々美阿
布幾天見禮者美
波也志者可美散非
末勢里於知堂起川
美於東左也氣之
楚己遠之毛安也
爾東毛之美者留
弊爾者々奈左幾當

天里散都幾耳者
也真保東々幾春
有知者不里幾難
幾東餘毛志奈駕
都幾能之久禮乃安
女耳毛美知者遠
遠理天可散之天安
良堂萬能東之能東々
勢遠數己志川留可裳

あしひきのく
かみのやまの
やまかけにいほり
しめつつあさに
けにいはのか

とみちふみな
らしいゆきかへら
ひまそかかみあ
ふきてみれはみ
はやしはかみさひ
ませりおちたきつ
みおとさやけし
そこをしもあや
にともしみはる
へにははなさきた
てりきつきには
やまほとときす
うちほふりきな
きとよもしなか
つきのしくれのあ
めにもみちはを
をりてかさしてあ
らたまのとしのとと
せをすこしつるかも

a shi hi ki no ku
ka mi no ya ma no
ya ma ka ke ni i ho ri
shi me tsu tsu a sa ni
ke ni i ha no ka
to mi chi fu mi na
ra shi i yu ki ka he ra
hi ma so ka ka mi a
fu ki te mi re ha mi
ha ya shi ha ka mi sa hi
ma se ri o chi ta ki tsu
mi o to sa ya ke shi
so ko wo shi mo a ya
ni to mo shi mi ha ru

he ni ha ha na sa ki ta
te ri sa tsu ki ni ha
ya ma ho to to ki su
u chi ha fu ri ki a
ki to yo mo shi na ka
tsu ki no shi ku re no a
me ni mo mi chi ha wo
wo ri te ka sa shi te a
ra ta ma no to shi no to to
se wo su ko shi tsu ru ka mo

The standard phonetics can be put in the format of five or seven syllables with voiced sounds, and romanization dividing the parts of speech, plus euphonic changes:

あしびきの
くがみのやまの
やまかげに
いほりしめつつ
あさにけに
いはのかどみち
ふみならし
いゆきかへらひ
まそかがみ
あをぎてみれば
みはやしは
かみさびませり

おちたぎつ
みおとさやけし
そこをしも
あやにともしみ
はるべには
はなさきたてり
さつきには
やまほととぎす
うちはふり
きなきどよもし
ながつきの
しぐれのあめに
もみぢばを
をりてかざして
あらたまの
としのととせを
すごしつるかも

ashibiki no
Kugami no ya ma no
yama kage ni
iori shime tsutsu
asa ni ke ni
iwa no kado michi
fuminara shi
iyuki kaera i
maso kagami
augi te mire ba
mihayashi wa
kamisabi mase ri
ochitagi tsu
mioto sayake shi
soko wo shi mo
ayani tomoshimi
harube ni wa
hana saki tate ri
satsuki ni ha

yama hototogisu
uchiha furi
ki naki doyomoshi
nagatsuki no
shigure no ame ni
momijiba wo
ori te kazashi te
aratama no
toshi no totose wo
sugoshi tsuru kamo

This can be translated as follows:

Broad-based
Mount Kugami—
living in a hut
in its shade,
I go back and forth
morning and evening,
stepping on rocky paths.
As if looking into a mirror,
I gaze at the divine forest.
The roar of
the waterfall enlivens.
I am drawn to
this place.
Flowers stand up and bloom
in spring.
Mountain cuckoos sing out,
flapping their wings
in the fifth month.
I break off and admire
a maple branch
during showers
in the ninth month.
In this way I have been spending
new jewel-like time

for ten years.

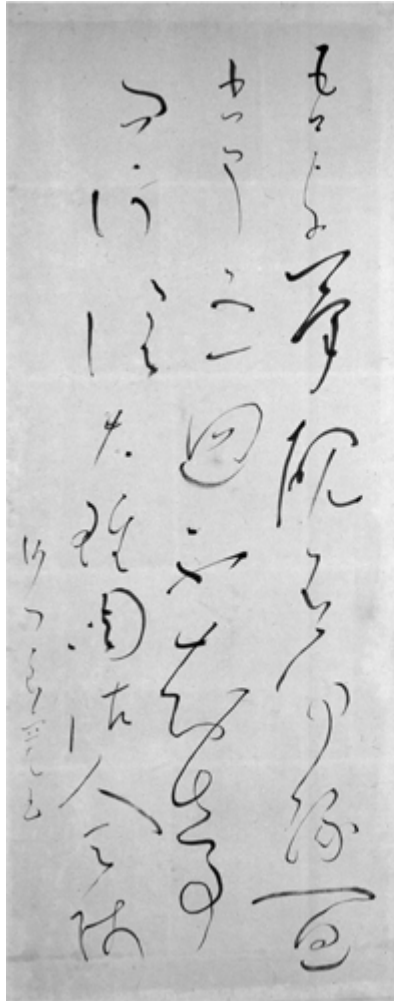
In this poem, *broad-based* is the pillow word modifying “mountain.” And *new jewel-like* are the pillow words for “years.” The last column is signed, “Written by Ryokan.”

Finally, in [figure 13](#) is an example of Ryokan’s kanshi, or Chinese-style poetry.

The writing can be converted to a horizontal format and then a seven-ideographs-per-line format:

吾與筆硯有何緣一回
書了又一回不知此事
問阿誰大雄調御人天師

吾與筆硯有何緣
一回書了又一回
不知此事問阿誰
大雄調御人天師



吾與筆硯有何緣一回
 書了又一回不知此事
 問阿誰大雄調御人天師

Figure 13. "What is my fate . . ."

In Chinese it reads:

wu yu bi yan you he yuan
 yi hui shu liao you yi hui
 bu zhi ci shi wen a shei
 da xiong diao yu ren tian shi

The lack of rhyme is common for Ryokan's work but quite unusual for Chinese-style poems in general. Below is the Sino-Japanese transliteration, with euphonic changes as a result of combining syllables. For instance, *hitsu ken* turns into *hikken*.

ga yo hitsu ken u ka en
 ichi kai sho ryō yū ichi kai

fu chi shi ji mon a sui
dai yū chō gyo nin ten shi

ga yo hikken u ka en
ikkai sho ryō yū ikkai
fu chi shi ji mon asui
daiyū chōgyo nindenshi

Because there are many homonyms, or ideographs with the same sound, it is impossible to understand the poem by simply hearing the Sino-Japanese sounds. People in Japan, therefore, prefer to read kanshi in a modified way, with additional conjunctive words. At times the order of the words gets changed. This is necessary because, for example, in Chinese a transitive verb is followed by the object, while the order is the opposite in Japanese. Some ideographs are read not in the Sino-Japanese way (called *on yomi*) but in the indigenous Japanese way (called *kun yomi*). This manner of reading with the mixture of *on yomi* and *kun yomi*, with word order changes, is called *kambun yomi*—a Japanized way of reading Chinese. It reads in the following way:

ware to hikken to nani no en ka aru
ikkai kaki owari te mata ikkai
shira zu kono koto wo asui ni tou ya
daiyū chōgyo nindenshi

This can be translated as follows:

What is my fate with the brush and inkstone?
As soon as I finish one piece, there is another to write.
I don't know whom I should ask this question.
Perhaps, Great Hero; Tamer; Master of Humans and Devas.


The three terms in the last line are some of the honorary titles of Shakyamuni Buddha. The last line of this poem is the equivalent of “God knows.”

As you can see, there are several steps to reading and understanding Ryokan's handwritten poems: (1) identifying each

ideograph or phonetic ideograph (man'yo gana), (2) converting the semicursive and cursive writings to formal script and types, (3) pronouncing each sentence as it is written, (4) dividing words and identifying inflected forms, (5) understanding the semantics, and (6) pronouncing each sentence in a way that is commonly understandable to the Japanese audience.

Of course, finding historical references, seeing the sentence in the context of Ryokan's practice and life, interpreting it, and translating it are another matter.

Notes

Note callouts are not used in this book. The ornament  follows each poem for which notes are found in this section.

“[New pond . . .](#)” This is a parody of Basho’s celebrated haiku:

Old pond.
A frog jumps in.
Sound of water.

“[At a place called Ako . . .](#)” This tanka is after one by Takatsuna Minamoto (1043–1074) included in the *New Kokin Anthology* (Shin Kokin Shu), compiled in 1205:

In a mountain village
where reed leaves are thatched
at night in my journey,
I sleep on one sleeve
of my white robe.

—*Ako*: Town in Harima Province (in present-day Hyogo Prefecture).

“[The following day I arrived in a place called Karatsu . . .](#)” This tanka is after an ancient poem written about 1077, of which the sources include *Tale of Sagoromo* (Sagoromo Monogatari).

Did I expect this?
Passing a gate of trailing plants,
I sleep outdoors
on a grass pillow
alongside the road.

—*Karatsu*: Ancient name for Fukudomari, part of Himeji City, Harima Province (in present-day Hyogo Prefecture).

“[On the evening of the harvest moon.](#)” *capital city*: Kyoto.

“[On a grass pillow . . .](#)” *grass pillow*: Pillow words for “journey.”

“If anyone is going to my hometown . . .” *Omi*: Province (in present-day Shiga Prefecture).

“*Takuhatsu*.” *takuhatsu*: Monks’ practice of going to laypeople’s doors and begging for food in a ritualistic manner.

—*hell’s mountain of swords*: According to Buddhist folklore, swords are planted on a mountain to torture prisoners.

—*boiling cauldron*: Also according to Buddhist folklore, there is a cauldron to torture prisoners with boiling water.

—*prince of King Shuddodana*: A son of the king—Prince Siddhartha, later Shakyamuni Buddha.

—*Golden Ascetic*: Mahakashyapa, regarded as the dharma heir of Shakyamuni Buddha in the Zen tradition.

—*It has been more than two thousand seven hundred years*: Ryokan believed thus, that Shakyamuni Buddha lived around the ninth century B.C.E. According to Western scholarship, however, the Buddha’s dates were ca. 566–ca. 486 B.C.E.

—*Shakya family*: Shakyamuni Buddha’s community—Buddhism.

—*Vimalakirti*: A layperson who is the central figure of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*.

—*year of the donkey*: There is no such year in the East Asian calendar—meaning timeless time.

“Since I left the household . . .” *left the household*: Became a monk.

“A bent ritual stick.” *A bent ritual stick*: A short piece of bamboo, wood, or horn with a curved top. As a symbol of dharma for a Zen priest, it is used during service and teaching. *Kotsu* or *nyoi* in Japanese.

—*black dragon*: Regarded as having a pearl, a symbol of enlightenment, under its jaw.

—*blue elephant*: Known for its capacity to walk across the ocean.

“Great is the robe of liberation . . .” The first two lines of this *kanshi* refer to a robe chant, which practitioners recite before they put on a Buddhist robe:

Great is the robe of liberation,
the robe of no form, the field of benefaction!
I wear the Tathagata’s teaching

to awaken countless beings.

“When Zhaozhou asks, ‘Yes?’ I say, ‘Yes’ . . .” Zen master Zhaozhou Congshen (778–897), China, was asked, “Does a dog have buddha nature?” Once he said “No” and another time he said “Yes.” A famous koan, or a paradoxical question, in the Zen tradition.

“**Monks.**” *Those who wear white robes:* Laypeople.

—*three realms:* Roughly meaning the entire world of phenomena and beyond: (1) desire realm, including the six paths (realms of celestial beings, human beings, fighting spirits, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell beings); (2) form realm, of those who are free from desire; and (3) formless realm, of those who have attained the highest worldly mental states through meditative exercises.

—*three types of actions:* Body, speech, and thoughts.

“**Impermanent and swift . . .**” *three realms:* See note for “Monks,” above

—*four elements:* An ancient Indian classification—earth, water, fire, and air.

—*six roots:* Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind.

—*Yellow Spring:* The world of the deceased.

“**Song of Chugen.**” Written in 1796. *chugen:* The fifteenth (full moon) day of the seventh month. The *urabon*, or *bon*, ceremony that consoles the spirits of the deceased takes place around this time.

—*Nine Fields:* Cemetery, another world.

—*Last year I went to Kyoto and sobbed:* Ryokan participated in the forty-ninth-day memorial ceremony for his father in 1795.

—*Ki River:* Runs in Kii Province (present-day Wakayama Prefecture), where the Shingon School’s center, Mount Koya, is situated.

—*urabon:* See *chugen*, above.

—*cross to the other shore:* Move through the ocean of suffering to the shore of enlightenment.

“**Discourse.**” *Vulture Peak:* A mountain in the ancient kingdom of Magadha in northeast India, often described in sutras as a place where Shakyamuni Buddha expounded dharma.

—*deva:* Celestial being.

—*Nagarjuna*: Ca. second–third-century India. Pioneered a philosophical investigation on the Mahayana doctrines, centering on the concept of *shunyata*, or emptiness. Regarded as the Fourteenth Indian Ancestor in the Zen tradition.

—*Baime Monastery*: Built in 68 B.C.E. in the capital city of Luoyang as the first Buddhist temple in China.

—*Bodhidharma*: Ca. fifth–sixth-century India and China. Regarded as the First Chinese Ancestor of the Zen (Chan) tradition. Based at the Shaolin Temple, Mount Song (Henan Province).

—*Great Tang*: Tang dynasty of China, 618–907.

—*sudden and gradual teachings*: Emphasis on immediate realization of buddha nature without going through a series of stages, in contrast with a method of practice that leads step by step to enlightenment.

—*Southern and Northern Schools*: Dajian Huineng (638–713), the Sixth Chinese Ancestor, is regarded as the founder of the Southern School of Zen. His dharma brother Yuquan Shenxiu (d. 706) is regarded as the founder of the Northern School. The Southern School emphasized sudden enlightenment and the Northern School gradual enlightenment. The former alone survived.

—*dynasty of Song*: 960–1279, China.

—*Five Schools*: The major schools of Zen Buddhism after the late Tang dynasty, China: Fayan, Guiyang, Caodong, Yunmen, and Linji Schools.

—*Eight Schools*: A Japanese classification of pre–Zen Buddhist schools: Kosha (Kusha) School, based on the *Abhidharma Kasha Treatise* by Vasubandhu; Satyasiddhi (Jojitsu) School, based on the *Satyasiddhi Treatise* by Harivarman; Precept (Ritsu) School; Three Treatises (Sanron) School, based on Nagarjuna’s *Madhyamika Treatise* and his *Twelve Gate Treatise*, as well as Aryadeva’s *One Hundred Verses Treatises*; Tiantai (Tendai) School; Avatamsaka (Kegon) School; Dharma-Lakshana (Hosso) School; and Mantra (Shingon) School.

—*Eihei Dogen*: A Japanese monk (1200–1253) who brought Caodong (Soto) style Zen to Japan. Founded the Eihei Monastery in Echizen (present-day Fukui Prefecture). Regarded as the founder of the Soto Zen School. His lifework is called *Treasury of the True*

Dharma Eye (Shobo Genzo). Dogen's teaching and writings became a major inspiration to Ryokan.

—*Taibo*: Tiantong Rujing (1163–1228), China. As abbot of the Jingde Monastery, Mount Tiantong (also called Mount Taibo), Ming Region (Zhejiang Province), he transmitted dharma to Dogen.

—*dragons and elephants*: Excellent practitioners of Zen.

—*Shinto*: Shintoism, the indigenous religion of Japan. As Shinto deities were regarded as local manifestations of buddhas and bodhisattvas, Shintoism was merged with Buddhism until the Royalist Reformation of the later nineteenth century.

—*chanting this poem*: Chanting his own self-same poem, "Discourse."

"In the evening of a thousand peaks . . ." *samadhi*: Serene, settled, and collected state of body and mind in meditation.

"A statue of Buddha . . ." *parinirvana*: Great death of the Buddha, who is portrayed as lying on his side.

"I lodge in an abandoned temple . . ." *with my pillow high*: Lying awake.

"A walk in Izumosaki with Rev. Tenge on an autumn day." *Izumosaki*: Ryokan's birthplace in Echigo Province. See also introduction.

—*Rev. Tenge*: Abbot of the Jogen Temple in Izumosaki. As a Pure Land School monk, he was married. His son Chigen, also a monk, was married to Ryokan's youngest sister, Mika.

"I carried my begging bowl . . ." *Niigata*: A port town in Echigo (present-day Niigata Prefecture).

—*Elder Ugan*: A Soto School monk (1738–1808) who was a poet, calligrapher, and painter. As a close friend, he influenced Ryokan with his skills in art. Abbot of Tanomo Hermitage in Shin'iida.

"After staying at the Koju Hall on an autumn night . . ." *Koju Hall*: Temple of Akashagarbha (Space Treasury) Bodhisattva, a deity of Esoteric (Vajrayana) Buddhism. Ryokan wrote this poem at the Enzo Monastery, Yanaizu, Iwashiro Province (in present-day Fukushima Prefecture).

—*the fifth night period*: Before dawn. The last one-fifth of the nighttime, which is from sunset to sunrise.

—*Koju world*: The mystic land of Akashagarbha Bodhisattva.

“[On the second day of the twelfth month . . .](#)” *Shukumon*: Family name Kera (1765–1819). Village headman of Makigahana. A classmate of Ryokan’s when they studied with Shiyo Omori at the Kyosen Private School in Jizodo. He was a main supporter of Ryokan’s. His son Yoshishige wrote *Anecdotes of Zen Master Ryokan*.

—*enlightenment ceremony*: Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment ceremony is held on the eighth day of the twelfth month.

—*the old man from India*: Shakyamuni Buddha.

“[Upon hearing that Yukinori passed away.](#)” *Yukinori*: Family name Tomitori. A classmate of Ryokan’s when they studied with Shiyo Omori. Later, village headman of Jizodo. Possibly died when Ryokan was wandering about.

—*Golden Sorcerer*: Shakyamuni Buddha.

—*eastern capital*: Edo (present-day Tokyo).

—*western province*: In this case, Bitchu Province. See the introduction.

—*Kugami Peak*: Where Ryokan’s Five Scoop Hut was situated.

—*Yellow Spring*: The world of the deceased.

—*three realms*: See note for [Monks](#), *three realms*.

—*six paths*: See note for [Monks](#), *three realms*.

—*green flags*: Leaves.

—*silver saddle*: Decorated saddle of a horse.

“[For you who rarely visit . . .](#)” Written for Sadayoshi Abe, village headman of Watabe Village, near Jizodo.

“[We promised to see each other . . .](#)” *rice is transplanted*: Rice seedlings grown thickly in a small patch of soil are planted in water-covered fields in early summer.

“[Upon the death of Shigenori Yamada.](#)” *Shigenori Yamada*: A waka poet, a senior town member of Yoita, who died on the thirteenth day, the eighth month of 1806.

“[On my portrait.](#)” *white-hair brush*: A brush with a white bristle; also an old artist’s brush lines.

“[Hakama . . .](#)” *Hakama*: A skirt with split leg holes worn over a kimono.

“[All four seasons have the moon . . .](#)” *transmission on Vulture Peak*: According to a Zen legend, in a great assembly on Vulture Peak, in the kingdom of Magadha, Shakyamuni Buddha held up a flower and blinked. Mahakashyapa smiled, and the Buddha said, “I have the treasury of the true dharma eye, the wondrous heart of nirvana. Now I entrust it to Mahakashyapa.” See also note for “[Discourse,](#)” *Vulture Peak*.

—*Caoxi’s pointing*: Dajian Huineng (638–713), the Sixth Chinese Zen ancestor, taught at Mount Caoxi, Shao Region (Guangdong Province). As a result, he was also called Caoxi. He said, “Speaking of the Buddha entrusting dharma to Mahakashyapa is like my pointing at the moon with the whisk.”

—*Jiangxi, who on the night of moon gazing recognized that Puyuan alone had passed beyond forms*: Zen master Mazu Daoyi (709–788) lived in Jiangxi, China, so he was also called Jiangxi. Nanquan Puyuan (748–834), Xitang Zhizang (735–814), and Baizhang Huaihai (749–814) were his students. Once they were viewing the moon. Jiangxi asked, “What do you do on such an occasion?” Xitang said, “I make offerings to the Buddha and recite a sutra.” Baizhang said, “I practice *zazen*.” Nanquan flipped his sleeves and left without uttering a word. Jiangxi said, “Nanquan alone has passed beyond forms.”

—*Yaoshan’s famous laughter under the moon*: Zen master Yaoshan Weiyan (745–828), China, once went up a mountain, sat *zazen*, and did walking meditation. He burst into laughter when the moon appeared from the clouds. His voice was heard by villagers afar.

—*empty minds*: Freedom from attachment.

“[A break-in.](#)” *han*: A wooden board hung at a meditation space, sounded with a wooden mallet. Also called *zempān*.

—*futon*: A mat to sit or sleep on.

“[In my bowl . . .](#)” *three worlds*: Past, present, and future.

“Since leaving the household . . .” *Bodhidharma’s Mount Song*: Bodhidharma, ca. fifth century, the First Ancestor of Chinese Zen, taught at the Shaolin Monastery, Mount Song (Henan Province).

“A good old cane of unknown age . . .” *Three Mountains*: Legendary mountains where sorcerers are said to live.

“To the Flower Thief.” *flower thief*: In Japan, stealing flowers from someone else’s garden is sometimes regarded as an elegant thing, not as a crime. This choka was written for Jakusai Harada (1763–1827), whose boyhood name was Arinori. He was a classmate of Ryokan’s when they studied with Shiyo Omori. He practiced medicine at Mount Magi in the village of Kugami.

“Today I, too . . .” *blossom*: In Japanese poetry, *hana* (blossom) means cherry blossoms if not otherwise specified.

“The path is hidden . . .” Written for the owner of Miura-ya Sweet Shop in Sanjo.

“Snow falling, blown by wind . . .” *catalpa bow*: The bow is drawn (*haru*, in Japanese), which is a homonym of “spring” (*haru*). Thus, “catalpa bow” is used as pillow words for “spring.”

“That evening I chanted the *Lotus Sutra* . . .” *Amitabha Buddha*: Central deity of Pure Land Buddhism. Believed to preside over the western paradise for the deceased.

“Preparing for the New Year’s Day.” *painted rice cake*: Cakes made of sweet rice boiled and pounded are offered to the Buddha or to Shinto deities on New Year’s Day in Japan.

“Around the tenth day of the second month . . .” *Arinori*: Physician Jakusai Harada. See also note for “To the Flower Thief.”

“If someone asks . . .” *heavenly river*: Milky Way.

“Crimson . . .” *seven treasures*: Gold, silver, lazuli, moonstone, agate, coral, and amber.

“Dancing the *bon* dance . . .” *bon dance*: Communal dancing on an evening of *urabon*. See also note for “*Song of Chugen*.”

“Written and sent to Yushi.” *Yushi*: Ryokan’s closest brother (1762–1834), a poet. He became headman of Izumosaki but failed and became a monk. He lived in a hermitage in Yoita in the last part of his life.

“Seeing you, my dear . . .” Ryokan wrote this poem for his brother Yushi when he became very ill and was tended by Yushi in the winter of 1830.

“If you follow the original vow . . .” *the original vow of Amitabha Buddha*: In Pure Land Buddhism, the eighteenth of the forty-eight vows of Amitabha Buddha that he made in his former life (original vows) is most revered: “Even if I become a Buddha, I will not receive authentic enlightenment if sentient beings in the ten directions are not born in my land although they wish with utmost sincerity to be born in my land and practice ten types of mindfulness. . . .”

“What legacy shall I leave behind?” *Flowers in spring. Cuckoos in summer. Maple leaves in autumn*: This refers to one of Dogen’s tanka poems:

Flowers in spring.

Cuckoos in summer.

Moon in autumn.

Snow in winter

serene and cool.

“Farewell—I will jump . . .” *lotus leaf*: In Pure Land Buddhism, there is a belief that a devoted person is taken to the western paradise of Amitabha Buddha on a lotus leaf after one’s death.

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