A Japanese monk of the Sōtō school of zen during the Edo period. After receiving a Confucian education (see Confucianism) in his youth, he turned aside from the path of governmental work laid out by his father and entered the Sōtō order at 18. This was a period in which, under the influence of Chinese Ts'ao-tung monks, the Sōtō school was undergoing a wave of reform, and many were advocating strict regimens of meditation and the study of Sōtō founder Dōgen's works. Ryōkan fell in with this reformist programme, and studied with several strict and uncompromising masters. In 1792, he received word that his father had travelled to Kyoto to present a work to the government denouncing political intrigue and corruption, and had then committed suicide, apparently to call attention to his protest. Ryōkan arranged the funeral and subsequent memorial services, and then set out on religious pilgrimage for several years. Only in 1804 did he settle down on Mt. Kugami, where he stayed for twelve years. He is remembered for the depth of his enlightenment that manifested in the spirit of acceptance and equality that he showed to all, from officials to prostitutes. He played with children, composed poetry in praise of nature, was renowned for his calligraphy, lived in extreme simplicity, and showed love for all living things to the extent of placing lice under his robes (see cīvara) to keep them warm, allowing thieves to take freely from his possessions, and letting one leg protrude from his mosquito net at night to give the mosquitos food.

**Buddhism Dictionary**

*  
1 あをみたる aomitaru  
なかにこぶしの hanazakari  
花ざかり in dense green  
a magnolia flower  
in full bloom
2 あきかぜに
独り立ちたる姿かな

aki kaze ni
hitori dachitaru sugata kana

in the autumn wind
standing alone
a shadow

3 秋高し
木立はふりぬ籬かな

akitakashi
kodachi wa furinu magaki kana

clear autumn sky
thicket of old trees
hedgerow

4 秋は高し
木立はふりぬこのやかた

aki wa takashi
kodachi wa furinu kono yakata

clear autumn sky
thicket of old trees
and this hut!

5 秋ひより
せむ羽すずめのはをとかな

aki hiyori
senba suzume no haoto kana

clear autumn sky
sparrows thousands
sound of wings

6 あげ巻の
昔をしのぶすみれ草

agemaki no
mukashi o shinobu sumire sō

tender memory
hairdressing children
violets in bloom

7 あけ窓の
むかしをしのぶすぐれ夢

ake mado no
mukashi o shinobu sugure yume

open window
the past comes back
better than a dream

8 雨もりや
また寝るとこのさむさかな

amamori ya
mata nerutoko no samusa kana

leaky roof
my bed again
wet and icy

9 あめのふる
日はあはれなり良寛坊

ame no furu
hi wa aware nari Ryōkan bo

on rainy days
the monk Ryokan
feels sorry for himself
10
新いけや
かはずとびこむ
音もなし
araike ya
kawazu tobikomu
oto mo nashi
the new pond
a frog jumps in
no splashing

11
いきせきと
升りて来るや
鰯うり
ikiseki to
noborite kuru ya
iwashi uri
gasping for air
the fishmonger in sweat
climbed up here

12
いくつれか
鷺のとびゆく
あきのくれ
ikutsure ka
sagi no tobi yuku
aki no kure
all small groups
herons in the sky
autumn dusk

13
いくむれか
よいで行くや
いわしうり
ikumure ka
oyoide yuku ya
iwashi uri
going forward
in zigzag
the fishmonger

14
いざさらば
あつさを忘れ
盆踊
iza saraba
atsusa o wasure
bonodori
let's go!
forget the heat
Bon dance

15
いささらは
我も返らん
あきの暮
iza saraba
ware mo kaeran
aki no kure
let's go, that's it!
I am leaving too
autumn dusk

16
稲舟や
さし行方や
三日の月
inabune ya
sashiyuku kata ya
mikka no tsuki
riceboat
goes straight to
the crescent moon

17
蟬に
ゆめさまされし
朝げかな
uguisu ni
yumesama sareshi
asage kana
a bush warbler
singing me out of a dream
rice in the morning
18
鴬や hyakuunin nagara
百人から not a man in a hundred's
気つかす aware of it

19
うらばたけ urabatake
はにふのかきの the next garden
やぶれから through a gaping hole
在の壁 in the clay wall

20
老翁が rōō ga
身は寒に理 old man
雪の竹 winter's cold embrace
snow-bound bamboo

21
可惜虚 oshimubeshi
空に馬を so sad to see
放ちけり a stray mare
alone in the fields

22
おちつけば ochitsukeba
great peace
ここも羅山の here as in Rozan
時雨哉 autumn mist

23
同じくば onajiku ba
はなのもとにて fell asleep
一とよねむ under cherry blossoms
just one night

24
かきつばた kakitsubata
我れこの亭に iris petal
酔ひにけり leaning against my hut
made me drunk

25
柿もぎの persimmon-gathering
きん玉寒し my balls are cold
秋の風 in the fall wind
顔回が
うちものゆかし
瓢かな

Gankai ga
uchimono yukashi
fukube kana

as valuable
as the sword of Ganka
my gourd!

来ては打ち
行きてはたたく
夜もすがら

kite wa uchi
yukite wa tataku
yomosugara

coming I clap
returning I knock
the night through

きませきみ
いが栗落ちし
みちよけて

kimase kimi
igakuri ochi shi
michi yokete
coming up here
walk round chestnut burrs
on the ground

けふこすは
あすはちりなむ
うめのはな

kyô kosu ba
asu wa chirinan
ume no hana
still on the branch
today - but tomorrow -
plum blossoms

こがねもて
いざ杖かはむ
さみつ坂

kogane mote
iza tsue kawan
Samizusaka
my last pennies
for a stick now
Mount Samizu

木枯しを
馬上ににらむ
男哉

kogarashi o
bajô ni niramu
otoko kana
cold winter wind
with rigid glance
a horseman

この人の
背中に踊り
できるなり

kono hito no
senaka ni odori
dekirunari
this woman
dancing on her broad back
we could almost!

この宮や
こぶしのはなに
ちるさくら

kono miya ya
kobushi no hana ni
chiru sakura
in the sanctuary
fell on the magnolia
cherry blossoms!
34
子らや子ら
子らが手を取
躑躅かな
koraya kora
cora ga te o toru
tsutsuji kana
come on, kids!
arazelas want
your harmful hands

35
さわぐ子の
とる智慧はなし
はつほたる
sawagu ko no
toru chie wa nashi
hatsu hotaru
chattering children
never catch
the first firefly

36
柴垣に
小鳥あつまる
ゆきのあさ
shibagaki ni
kotori atsumaru
yuki no asa
hedge branches
young birds are raised
morning snow

37
柴焼き
しくれ開夜と
なりにけり
shiba yaite
shigure kiku yo to
nari ni keri
burning wood
night is falling
with rain

38
柴の戸に
つゆのたまりや
今朝のあさ
shiba no to ni
tsuyu no tamari ya
kesa no asa
on my door knob
a pearl of dew
early morning

39
涼しさを
忘れまひそや
今年竹
suzushisa o
wasuremai zo ya
kotoshidake
cooling green
do not forget
bamboo of the year

40
すまでらの
むかしを問へば
やまざくら
Sumadera no
mukashi o toeba
yamazakura
Suma temple
for its history
ask the wild cherry tree

41
青嵐
吸物は
白牡丹
seiran
suimono wa
shiro botan
summer wind
brings into my soup
a white peony
そめいろのをとつれつげよよるのかり
Someiro no otozure tsugeyo yoru no kari
about Someiro tell me all you know wild geese in the evening

たかつきに向かふあしたの寒さかな
takatsuki ni mukau ashita no samusa kana
at dawn before my eating tray sitting in the cold

たくほどはかぜがもてくるおちばかな
takuhodo wa kaze ga motekuru ochiba kana
the wind brings enough of fallen leaves to make a fire

たるれはたるるままの庭の草
taorure ba taoruru mama no niwa no kusa
blades go down and stay laying garden grass

だれ聞けとま菰が原の行々子
dare kike to makomo ga hara no gyōgyōshi
I am all ears in wild rice fields the song of warblers

つとにせむよしののさとのはなかたみ
tsuto ni sen Yoshino no sato no hanagatami
to remember Yoshino cherry a basket of flowers

手を振てよいでゆくやいはしうり
te o furite oyoide yuku ya iwashi uri
waving his arms zigzag it in advance the merchant of sardines

鉄鉢に明日の米あり夕涼
tetsubachi ni asu no kome ari yūsuzumi
in the iron bowl rice for tomorrow the cool evening!
<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>手拭で年をかくすや盆踊</td>
<td>tenuguide toshi o kakusu ya bonodori headbands we can hide years Bon dance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51</td>
<td>手もたゆくあふぐ扇のおきどころ</td>
<td>te mota yuku ōgu ōgi no okidokoro my tired hand seeks to find a place for the fan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>なつのよやのみをかぞへてあかしけり</td>
<td>natsu no yo ya nomi o kazoete akashikeri summer night to count all my fleas until dawn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>なへみがくおとにまぎるる雨蛙</td>
<td>nabe migaku oto ni magiruru amagaeru scrub the pot make louder noise green frogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54</td>
<td>鳥のすのところがへするさつきあめ</td>
<td>nio no su no tokoro gaesuru satsuki ame grebe’s nest found everywhere May showers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55</td>
<td>ぬす人に取り残されし窓の月</td>
<td>nusubito ni tori nokosareshi mado no tsuki shining window the thief left it behind the moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56</td>
<td>のっぺりと師走も知らず今朝の春</td>
<td>nopperi to shiwasu mo shirazu kesa no haru what a relief! missed the end of the year spring morning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57</td>
<td>のっぽりと師走も知らず弥彦山</td>
<td>nopperi to shiwasu mo shirazu Yahiko yama how reckless! ignores the end of the year Mount Yahiko</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
58
萩すすき
露のほるまで
なかめはや
hagi susuki
tsuyu no boru made
nakame baya
bush clover pampas grass
desire to contemplate
until dew formed

59
萩すすき
わが行く道の
しるべせよ
hagi susuki
waga yuku michi no
shirubeseyo
bush clover pampas grass
all along my path
so familiar!

60
はちたたき
昔も今も
鉢叩き
hachi tataki
mukashi mo ima mo
hachi tataki
hitting beating
as before and now
hitting my bowl

61
初時雨
名もなき山の
おもしろき
hatsu shigure
na mo naki yama no
omoshiroki
the first drizzle
a mountain without name
it is fun!

62
はるさめや
門松の注連
ゆるみけ
harusame ya
kadomatsu no shime
yurumi keri
spring rain
the New Year shime
hung out

63
はるさめや
静かになでる
やれふくへ
harusame ya
shizukani naderu
yarefukube
spring rain
I tenderly caress
my cracked gourd

64
春さめや
友をたつぬる
おもやあり
harusame ya
tomo o tazunuru
omoya ari
spring rain
wish to visit a friend
today

65
人の来て
またも頭巾を
ぬがせり
hito no kite
mata mo zukin o
nugase keri
someone has come
once again
remove my bonnet
66 人のみな
ねぶたき時の
ぎゃうぎゃう

hito no mina
nebutaki toki no
gyōgyōshi

like all of us
when falling asleep
the song of warblers

67 日々々に
時雨の降れば
人老い

hibi hibi ni
shigure no fureba
hito oinu
day by day by day
drizzly cold rain
getting old

68 火付ひに
橋越へてゆく
小夜時雨

hi morai ni
hashi koete yuku
sayo shigure
gathering twigs
then crossing the bridge
in the evening mist

69 昼顔や
どちらの露の
情やら

hirugao ya
dochira no tsuyu no
nasake yara
morning glory
dew formed on each bell
as expected

70 昼日中
真菰の中の
行々子

hiru hi naka
makomo no naka no
gyōgyōshi
noon hours
in the wild rice fields
the song of warblers

71 風鈴ゃ
竹を去ること
二三尺

fūrin ya
take o saru koto
ni san shaku
windbells
rock beyond the bamboo
two or three feet

72 冬川や
峰より鷲の
にらみけり

fuyu gawa ya
mine yori washi no
nirami keri
river in winter
soaring over peaks
an eagle spots its prey

73 平生の
身持ちによしそ
風呂上がり

heizei no
mimochi ni hoshi ya
furo agari
never
felt so good
out of the hot tub!
74
ほろ酔の
あしもと軽し
春のかぜ

horoyoi no
ashimoto karushi
haru no kaze
like drunk
a light step forward
in spring wind

75
摩頂して
ひとりだちけり
秋のかぜ

machō shite
hitori dachi keri
aki no kaze
the peak reached
lonely I stands
the winds of autumn

76
真昼中
ほろりほろりと
けしのはな

mahiru naka
horori horori to
keshi no hana
at midday
appear everywhere
poppy flowers

77
水の面に
あや織りみだる
はるのあめ

mizu no mo ni
ayaori midaru
haru no ame
the surface of the water
like ornate silk
spring rain

78
名月や
けいとう花も
にょつきにょつき

meigetsu ya
keitō hana mo
nyoki nyoki
at full moon
flowering cockscombs
appear everywhere

79
名月や
庭のはせをと
せいくらべ

meigetsu ya
niwa no bashō to
sei kurabe
at full moon
measure myself against
Basho
in my garden

80
もみち葉の
錦のあきや
唐衣

momijiba no
nishiki no aki ya
karagoromo
autumn - a brocade
of red maple leaves -
Tang dress

81
屋根引の
金玉しほむ
秋の風

yanebiki no
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aki no kaze
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my balls are cold
in the fall wind
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<td>やま里は蛙の声になりけり</td>
<td>mountain hamlet drowned in croaking green frogs</td>
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<td>83</td>
<td>山しくれ酒やの蔵に波深し</td>
<td>mountain rain in sake warehouse deep puddles</td>
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<tr>
<td>84</td>
<td>山は花酒や酒やの杉ばやし</td>
<td>mountain in bloom a single cry: sake, sake! the woods ring with it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>85</td>
<td>ゆふせむとくさのまくらに留守のあむ</td>
<td>perfect calm on a grass pillow far from my hut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>雪しろのかかる芝生のつくずくし</td>
<td>slush on the grass growing horsetail</td>
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<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>雪しろのよする古野のつくずくし</td>
<td>slush spreads on the old field growing horsetail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>雪しろや古野にかかるつくずくし</td>
<td>slush reveals an old field growing horsetail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89</td>
<td>ゆくあきのあはれを誰にかたらまし</td>
<td>about the pathos of departing autumn whom can I tell?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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遠音かな
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the distant croaking
green frogs

91
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ところはここか
蓮の花
where to doze off
in this drunken state
the lotus flower

92
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せむざいはただ
虫の声	nightfall
only singing insects
in the garden

93
よしや寝む
すまのうらわの
なみまくら
what fun! sleep
on the shores of Suma
waves as a pillow!

94
よそはでも
かほはしろいぞ
よめがきみ
without powder
the whiteness of your face
bride!

95
世の中は
さくらの花に
なりけり
all around us
the world is more than
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96
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97
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おすことし
loach from gourd
slipping old hand
love as well
| 98 | わが宿へ つれて行きたし 蓮に鳥 | waga yado e tsurete yikitashi hasu ni tori |
| 99 | われよびて 故郷へ行や 夜の雁 | ware yobite kokyô e yuku ya yoru no kari |
| 100 | 裏を見せ (うらを見せ) 表を見せて (おもてを見せて) 散る紅葉 (散るもみじ) | ura o mise omote o misete chiru momiji |
| 101 | 散る桜 残る桜も 散る桜 | chiru sakura nokoru sakura mo chiru sakura |

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inabune ya / sashiyuku kata ya / mikka no tsuki
iza saraba / atsusa o wasure / bonodori
iza saraba / ware mo kaeran / aki no kure
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te mota yuku / ōgu ōgi no / okidokoro
50
tenuguide / toshi o kakusu / ya bonodori
48
te o furite / oyoide yuku ya / iwashi uri
49
tetsubachi ni / asu no kome ari / yūsuzumi
47
tsuto ni sen / Yoshino no sato no / hanagatami
17
uguisu ni / yumesama sareshi / asage kana
18
uguisu ya / hyakunin nagara / kigatsukazu
19
urabatake / hanifu no kaki no / yabure kara
100
ura o mise / omote o misete / chiru momiji
97
waga koi wa / fukube de dojō o / osu gotoshi
98
waga yado e / tsurete yukitashi / hasu ni tori
99
ware yobite / kokyō e yuku ya / yoru no kari
83
yamashigure / sakaya no kura ni / nami fukashi
84
yama wa hana / sakeya sakeya no / sugibayashi
82
yamazato wa / kaeru no koe ni / nari ni keri
81
yanebiki no / kintama shibomu / aki no kaze
91
yoi fushi no / tokorowa koko ka / basu no hana
92
yoiyamiya / senzai wa tada / mushi no koe
95
yo no naka wa / sakura no hana / ni nari keri
93
yoshi ya nen / Suma no urawa no / nami makura
94
yoso wa demo / kao wa shiroizo / yome ga kimi
86
yukishiru no / kakaru shibafu no / tsukuzukushi
87
yukishiru no / yosuru furu ya no / tsukuzukushi
88
yukishiru ya / furu ya ni kakaru / tsukuzukushi
89
yuku aki no / aware o dare ni / katara mashi
90
yume samete / kiku wa kawazu no / tōne kana
85
yüzen to / kusa no makura ni / rusu no an
One Robe, One Bowl; The Zen Poetry of Ryōkan, 1977, translated and introduced by John Stevens.


The Zen Fool: Ryōkan, 2000, by Misao Kodama and Hikosaku Yanagashima.


Ryokan: Selected Tanka and Haiku, translated from the Japanese by Sanford Goldstein, Shigeo Mizoguchi and Fujisato Kitajima (Kokodo, 2000, pp. 218)

Ryokan’s Calligraphy, by Kiichi Kato; translated by Sanford Goldstein and Fujisato Kitajima (Kokodo, 1997)


YAMAMOTO RYŌKAN (1758-1831), Haiku tr. by Michael Haldane http://www.michaelhaldane.com/HaikuNonJapanese.htm

autumn wind -
a figure
standing alone

first winter-rain -
a nameless mountain
 quaintly

in the begging-bowl
tomorrow’s rice -
evening breeze

*yūsuzumi:* cooling oneself in the evening after work and the heat of the Japanese summer day.

the poignancy
of closing autumn, whom
to tell?

when everyone
wants to sleep -
reed-warblers

*gyōgyōshi*: ’exaggerated’. It refers to the sound made by the yoshikiri (reed-warbler).
bring tidings
from Mt. Shumi,
eventide wild geese

*Mt. Shumi: at the centre of the Buddhist paradise. Ryōkan is requesting the migrating wild geese to return from the West with news of his father.

fallen
still
garden plants

* * *

Ryokan (1758-1831)
Ryokan was born in 1758, the first son in a noble family in Izumozaki in the Echigo District. He entered the priesthood at the age of 18 and was given the Buddhist name "Ryokan" when he was 22 years old. He kept searching for the ultimate truths through his life. Leaning the Chinese classics and poetry at Entsu Temple of the Soto Sect in Tamashima in the Bichu District, he practiced hard asceticism under Priest Kokusen for 20 years. After this, he traveled all over the country on foot and returned to his home village just before the age of 40. He lived at the Gogoan hut in Kokujyo Temple on Mt. Kugami, and then moved down to a thatched hut in Otoko Shrine at the foot of the Mountain. It is said that he enjoyed writing traditional Japanese poetry, Chinese poetry and calligraphy all through his simple, carefree and unselfish life. He was also called "Temari-Shonin (The Priest who Plays with a Temari ball)" and was much loved by children, since he often played with a Temari ball (Japanese cotton-wound ball), Ohajiki (small glass counters for playing games) together with children in the mountain village. Much of his poetry and letters which still remain, all of which are full of his sympathy and affection for children, describe his joyful times with children and also reveal his high personal qualities as a man who devoted his life to meditation. Ryokan was a Zen priest, but he never established his own temple, and lived by alms. Instead of preaching, he enjoyed companionship and conversation with many ordinary people. In 1831, he ended his 74-year life as an honest priest respected and loved by all he knew.

* * *

Ryokan is a man who has many stories told about him. He is famous for spending his days playing “hide and seek” and traditional Japanese ball games (“temari”) with children.

One day a bamboo shoot sprouted from below the floor of his hermitage and grew up to the ceiling. As Ryokan used a candle to burn a hole in the ceiling for the bamboo shoot to grow out, he accidentally burned the hut to the ground.

Ryokan also composed poems and songs, and was skilled in calligraphy. People tried to get him to write poems when they happened to find him, but Ryokan would never write anything for them. This is why the writings that still exist are so popular and expensive. I have heard that almost all of the writings with Ryokan’s signature which appear on the market are actually counterfeit.
This story about Ryokan is also well known. In Ryokan's last years, a beautiful young nun visited his hermitage frequently and they composed and exchanged love poems with each other. When an earthquake occurred at Echigo-Sanjo, he sent a strange letter that said "It is good to suffer a misfortune when suffering a misfortune."

Another famous story has to do with Ryokan as a child. He was scolded by his father, who told him "If you make a funny face you will turn into a flounder." Ryokan was very worried about being able to make it to the sea in time when he turned into the fish, so he waited on a rock on the seashore for a long time.

Ryokan (1758-1831) lived in the same age as the haiku poet Issa Kobayashi (born in 1763), through the reigns of Bunka to Bunsei, at the end of the Edo era. Ryokan died in 1831(2nd year of Tenpo), just 37 years before the Meiji Restoration. This time was almost the beginning of the modern age. It was the same time that Mozart (1756-1796) was active in the West. The way of life in those days can still be seen at a small, poor hermitage ("Gogo-an") on Mt. Kugami in Echigo where Ryokan lived for 20 years, the longest time that he spent in one place. I sometimes visit there and chant sutras with around 20 other Buddhists of the Soto sect, the last time being around 2 years ago. It was 20 years ago that I first visited.

The day after my life at Eihei temple ended I left for Mt. Kugami. A man whom I met at the Eihei temple`s Unsui ascetic exercises gave me a lift to the mountain and a bed to sleep in. From the bottom of mountain I climbed the path, which is similar to the one at Eihei temple, to the small hermitage. Everyone who went to this hermitage was astonished. "This is the place where the famous Ryokan lived? How did he stand the cold winter and live such a long life?" Ryokan lived to be 74 years old, which was very old at that time, even though he had a weak constitution ever since he was young.

『Kanjinjikibun』 is a sentence where Rokan's beliefs are pointed out clearly. It means "A priest must fulfill their duty by religious austerities."

"Religious austerities" means that a priest chants a sutra called "kadozuke" from house to house and does an act of charity. In turn, the house contributes a small amount of something in the house, such as rice or grain. Both parties treasure the spirit of mutual aid that results from giving to each other. This has been a traditional form of Buddhism since Buddhism was created. It is an important precept of Buddhism that religious austerities must be done indiscriminately, to both rich and poor houses. 「乞食 Kotsujiki」 in Buddhism and 「乞食 kojiki」 use the same Chinese characters, but the meanings are as different as Heaven and Earth. We call this lifestyle “Jomyoshoku” (the innocent food of a priest).

Ryokan manifested the meaning of Buddhist precepts in his life, and not only in his words. Because of this, everyone who came into contact with him was educated in Buddhist ways, without even speaking to him. A curious story about Ryokan says that even though he did not preach or recommend good conduct when he stayed as a guest in someone's house, the atmosphere naturally became peaceful and the family happy. The house was also enveloped in a sweet smell for a few days after Ryokan left.

http://onebowl.shousouji.com/english/ryokan2.html

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The Way of the Holy Fool
At the crossroads this year, after
begging all day
I lingered at the village temple.
Children gather round me and
whisper,
'The crazy monk has come back
to play.'

—Taigu Ryokan

Taigu Ryokan lives on as one of Japan’s best-loved poets, the wise fool who wrote of his humble life with directness. Born in 1758, he is part of a tradition of radical Zen poets, or ‘great fools,’ that includes China’s Han-shan and P’ang Yun (Layman P’ang) and Japan’s Ikkyu Sojun and Hakuin Ekaku.

The eldest of seven children, Ryokan grew up near Mount Kugami in the town of Izumozaki, a community for artists and writers. His father, a scholar of Japanese literature and a renowned haiku poet, was the town’s ineffectual mayor. His mother was a quiet woman who eventually had to deal with her husband’s abandoning his position and his family and then drowning himself in the river Katsura.

In his youth, Ryokan trained under a Confucian scholar and began to study Chinese literature in the original. At 16, he had already flirted with a life of gambling and women, then surprised everyone by taking up the study of Soto Zen at the nearby Koshoji temple. (Soto and Rinzai comprise the two main schools of Japanese Zen Buddhism.) He shaved his head and took his robes and vows. At 21, he moved to the Entsuji temple in Bitchu, but eventually became disillusioned and outraged at the corrupt practices of vain and greedy temple priests and left to make his mountain hermitage.

Ryokan had no disciples and ran no temple; in the eyes of the world he was a penniless monk who spent his life in the snow country of Mount Kugami. He admired most of the teachings of Dogen, the 13th century monk who first brought Soto Zen to Japan. He was also drawn to the unconventional life and poetry of the Zen mountain poet Han-shan, who lived in China sometime during the T’ang Dynasty (618 to 907). He repeatedly refused to be honored or confined as a 'professional,' either as a Buddhist priest or as a poet. He wrote:

Who says my poems are poems?
These poems are not poems.
When you can understand this,
then we can begin to speak of poetry.
Ryokan never published a collection of verse while he was alive. His practice consisted of sitting in zazen meditation, walking in the woods, playing with children, making his daily begging rounds, reading and writing poetry, doing calligraphy, and on occasion drinking wine with friends.

Ryokan later dubbed himself Taigu, or ‘Great Fool,’ but this title had a special meaning. A Zen master who taught the young Ryokan described him this way: 'Ryokan looks like a fool, but his way of life is an entirely emancipated one. He lives on playing, so to say, with his destiny, liberating himself from every kind of fetter.' He went on to describe his disciple's simple life: 'In the morning he wanders out of his hut and goes God knows where and in the evening loiters around somewhere. For fame he cares nothing. Men’s cunning ways he puts out of the question.' His freewheeling spirit had much in common with the American writer Henry David Thoreau’s. Ryokan’s life was an affirmation of alternate values and a rebuke to the hypocrisy and rigid values found in Japanese Zen monasteries and in society at large.

His ‘foolishness’ belongs in a Taoist-Buddhist context as an inversion of social norms. Ryokan declares the Way of the Fool in his poem ‘No Mind’:

With no mind, flowers lure the butterfly;
With no mind, the butterfly visits the blossoms.
Yet when flowers bloom, the butterfly comes;
When the butterfly comes, the flowers bloom.

‘No mind,’ or mushin, means not to cling or to strive, and when it is joined with mujo, or acceptance of life’s impermanence, we have the greatness of the fool.

To achieve this original or beginner’s mind, Ryokan sought the company of children, kept his humble begging rounds, accepted his everyday life, and recorded it all in his authentic poems. Dropping whatever he was doing, he would turn to join the children’s games of tag and blindman’s buff, hide-and-seek, and ‘grass fights.’ He was once caught playing marbles with a geisha and is said never to have refused a game of Go. He relished playing dead for the children, who would bury him in leaves, and he would spend the day picking flowers with them, forgetting his begging rounds.

The stories of Ryokan’s playfulness are legendary. Here’s one, preserved after his death in 1831 in Ryokan’s family archive:

‘Ryokan was playing hide-and-seek, and when it came his turn to hide, he looked around for a spot where the children wouldn’t find him. Noticing a tall haystack, he crawled inside, concealing himself completely in the hay. No matter how hard they searched, the children couldn’t find him. Soon they
grew tired of playing, the sun began to set, and when they saw the smoke rising from the dinner fires, they deserted Ryokan and returned to their homes. Unaware of this, Ryokan imagined the children were still searching for him. Thinking, ‘Here they come to look for me! Now they’re going to find me,’ he waited and waited. He waited all night and was still waiting when dawn arrived. In farmhouses, in the morning the kitchen hearth is lit by burning bundles of hay, and when the farmer’s daughter came to fetch some of these, she was startled to find Ryokan hiding in the haystack. ‘Ryokan! What in the world are you doing here?’ she cried. ‘Shh!’ Ryokan warned her, ‘The children will find me.’

His tendency to misplace things—his walking stick, his begging bowl, books, even his underwear—was well known. Among the stories of his chronic forgetfulness is one of a visit by the famous scholar Kameda Bosai. When Bosai found Ryokan sitting zazen on the porch of his hut, he waited—several hours—for the monk to finish, and then Bosai and Ryokan happily talked poetry, philosophy, and writing until evening, when Ryokan rose to fetch them some sake from town.

Again Bosai waited several hours, then grew concerned and began to walk toward the village. When he found his host a hundred yards away, sitting under a pine tree, he exclaimed, ‘Ryokan! Where have you been? I’ve been waiting for hours and was afraid something had happened to you.’ Ryokan looked up. ‘Bosai, you have just come in time. Look, isn’t the moon splendid tonight?’ When Bosai asked about the sake, Ryokan replied, ‘Oh, yes, the sake. I forgot all about it,’ and headed off to town. To be distracted by life’s moments is indeed a Zen virtue, though it is often a trial for friends.

Ryokan often wrote in the Kanshi form—poems composed in classical Chinese. Taken together, his Kanshi poems are best seen as an undated journal, a record of a humble life spent living in the moment without thoughts of fame and power. In recording his experience of play, begging, observing people and nature, and accepting life’s bounty, Ryokan becomes the self-deprecating great fool in order to mentor us in an authentic life of simplicity, trust, humility, and finding the true way in everyday life.