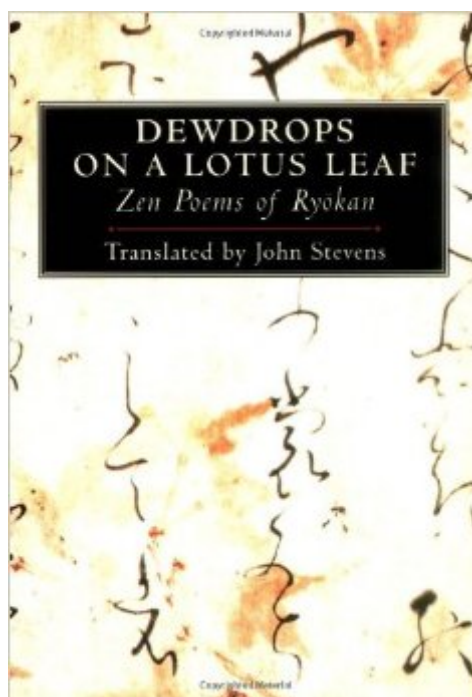


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Dewdrops On A Lotus Leaf: Zen Poems Of Ryokan



Synopsis

The Japanese poet-recluse Ryokan (1758–1831) is one of the most beloved figures of Asian literature, renowned for his beautiful verse, exquisite calligraphy, and eccentric character.

Deceptively simple, Ryokan's poems transcend artifice, presenting spontaneous expressions of pure Zen spirit. Like his contemporary Thoreau, Ryokan celebrates nature and the natural life, but his poems touch the whole range of human experience: joy and sadness, pleasure and pain, enlightenment and illusion, love and loneliness. This collection of translations reflects the full spectrum of Ryokan's spiritual and poetic vision, including Japanese haiku, longer folk songs, and Chinese-style verse. Fifteen ink paintings by Koshi no Sengai (1895–1958) complement these translations and beautifully depict the spirit of this famous poet.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

These are fresh and spare and unforgettable poems, reproduced by John Stevens with directness and fidelity to the original (or so I have been told by my multilingual friends.) Ryokan was a nature poet but fully in touch with humanity and he had this touch in his poems such that each poem has many levels and can be appreciated through any or all. "At night I got drunk on peach blossoms by the river. I never cared about returning home,..." "How can you not love it? I can taste the dewdrops already..."

This book is an extremely well balanced collection of poetry and drawings by Ryokan. I know no Japanese to assess the "accuracy" of the translation, but the poems all stand as poetry in their own

right in English. Many poems are similar to the Chinese Zen (Chan) poetry - drawing on keen observation rather than metaphor. Others are delightful pieces in which the poet gently laughs at himself. A few poems have a didactic intent but Ryokan's understanding of Buddhism leaves little room for the Buddhist scholastics. This small book should be on the "must read" list for anyone interested in religious poetry.

I like the way Stephens includes enough information about Ryokan to help understand the poetry. As Ryokan notes himself, outside his Zen, he has no Poetry to offer. Ryokan refusing to take a position of a Zen Abbot, instead goes back to the place of his youth and takes hermitage. "The cold wind gathers enough fallen leaves to build my fire." His code of living avoids flattery as much as obsequiousness, he teaches with a tear, plays with children, and falls in love with a young nun. All of this brings forward our own starkling humanity! Stephens does a master presentation in bringing this material together in such an artful way as to illuminate all sides of Ryokan with that of the reader themselves. And with that the poetry comes alive.

Japanese master poet, playful monk, an old man who fell in love with a young zen nun, his possession an old begging bowl...he may be one of the most contented poets you will ever read. Of his hut deep in the mountains, he wrote: "unless you got lost on purpose/ you might never get this far."

Perfect. A master, of course, I found the poetry in this volume to be to the point, without flourish while still remaining subtle and containing depths. If Zen were a language, this is what it would speak.

This third edition (Tokyo, 1954) is created of folded rice paper and bound by a fine green ribbon - this volume fascinates me each time I read it. Ryokwan-sama speaks through his poetry of gentle musings, of wisdom found by not searching for it, and of both happiness & despair. This translation has been made from the Chinese text by Jakob Fischer. This is certainly a labor of love which honors Ryokwan and the culture of the Orient. These contemplations and astute observations of this eccentric priest's life reach towards the zen of living. "I longed on that warm spring day, to stop the enchanted hours in their flight."

I love Ryokan and turn to this book often. It has no fluff or pretense in it the way a lot of classic English poetry has. Ryokan is a poet for those they usually can't stand poetry like myself. He writes

about nature, meditation, going for alms and the general ups and downs of human life in a very refreshing way.

"Go as deep as you can into life and you can give up blossoms" - that is Ryokan. He is eccentric, wise, simple and profound. The associated calligraphies are beautiful - such as the compassionate, eager monk seated near the little pine-tree in the rain - telling it - "I will gladly give you my straw hat and thatched coat to ward off the rain". And some of the poems have a meditative quality - you can read them casually, often and flip over - and one day you just realize them ... it is hard to explain. However, I am not an expert on zen or buddhism and do not know Japanese, so I cannot comment on the technicalities. I came across this accidentally and I liked it !

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