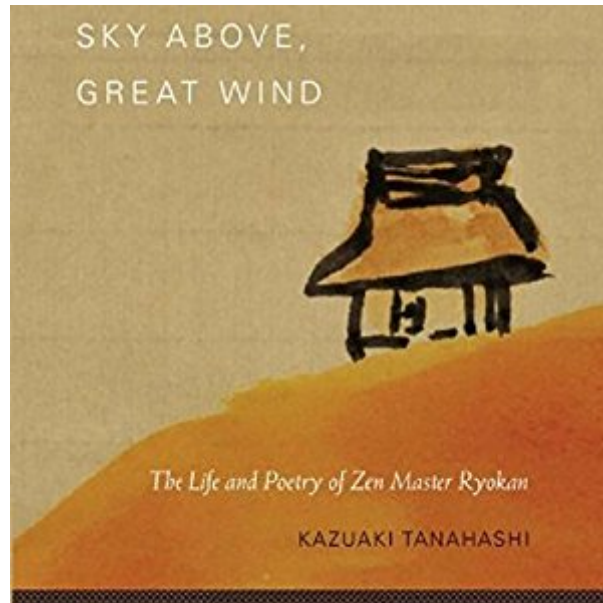


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Sky Above, Great Wind: The Life And Poetry Of Zen Master Ryokan



Synopsis

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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I am so happy and so grateful for this outstanding collection of prose, poems and stories. I have felt a closeness to Ryokan for 40 years or so, and have had to settle for just a few books in English.

One in particular, which I will not name out of respect, seemed to almost exclusively focus on the sadder more melancholy poems, but in this brilliant translation by Kazuaki Tanahashi we find a much more well rounded presentation of Ryokan; his sacredness, his Zen mind, his outlandish humor, his irreverence, his lonely moments and his searing insight. I find myself deeply moved by this much bigger view of the Great Fool. I wish I could drink sake' with him and play hide and seek with the village children. Ryokan is a great inspiration for me. Endless bows to both Ryokan and Mr. Tanahashi.

In *Sky Above, Great Wind*, Tanahashi elegantly presents a well-rounded sampling of the writings of Master Ryokan accompanied by biographical information and insightful analysis of the iconic master's calligraphy, poetic form, and subject matter. Sampling a diverse array of Ryokan's works, Tanahashi demonstrates that there is more to the Great Fool than many have presumed. He thus paints a complex image of the poet through a balance of poems dwelling on simplistic child-like elation with those depicting the internal struggle of loneliness, along with the whole spectrum of emotions in between. These poems evoke contemplation of the many facets of existence, including the individual's understanding of the universe. For example, Ryokan asks us: How could we discuss this and that without knowing the whole world is reflected in a single pearl? Tanahashi constantly strives to capture that which is lost in translation and brings the ancient word alive and fresh. With its detailed yet succinct commentary, humorous anecdotes, and disarmingly beautiful poems, this collection is invaluable for any connoisseur of Zen poetry or Buddhist teachings. For anyone wanting to know more about the life of Ryokan, I recommend *Extraordinary Zen Masters: A Maverick, a Master of Masters, and a Wandering Poet* (which I got as a review copy) by the accomplished translator, writer, and Zen teacher John Stevens who also translated *Rengetsu: Life and Poetry of Lotus Moon*. *Extraordinary Zen Masters* profiles three influential, interesting and creative Zen masters (Ryokan obviously being one of them), told in a biographically straight forward, but engaging way.

Kaz Tanahashi, the author and translator of this new book on Ryokan, was my calligraphy instructor and his inclusion of examples and discussion of Ryokan's calligraphy makes the book especially worthwhile. I already own two of John Steven's translations of Ryokan and was curious to examine this far more extensive book. Before even reading the poems, I studied the calligraphy. The brush stroke reveals the artist, the poet. The lightness, the thinness, the flowing together hint about the style of poetry. It is so different than Korean thick, strong, confident calligraphy and the refined,

scholarly, and carefully stylized Chinese lines. Ryokan dances freely on tip toes. Leaving the Zen monastery after completing training and living alone near temples in small huts, he became independent from rules and norms, yet lived his practice in poverty, relishing the simplicity of the moment of each natural event. His poetry reflects this approach to life. He famously was known to entertain children, as he himself was much a child with 'beginner's mind.' A lonely hermit who loved company, he late in life developed a teacher-student romantic relationship with the much younger nun Teishin, and we are glad for that comfort as he died. After the poems, Tanahaski presents a series of anecdotes and then a thorough analysis of Ryokan's various poetic forms--haiku, waka, and kanshi. This fine book gives the reader a deeper impression of the poet and Zen practitioner. It inspires and motivates. Ryokan reminds us to awake from our dream.

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