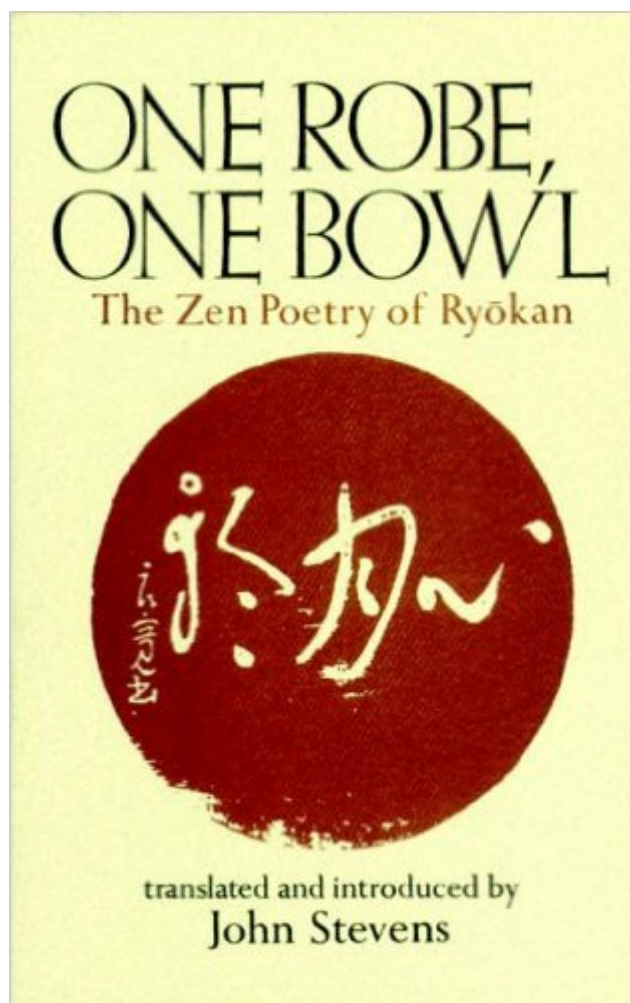


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# One Robe, One Bowl: The Zen Poetry Of Ryokan



## Synopsis

The hermit-monk Ryokan, long beloved in Japan both for his poetry and for his character, belongs in the tradition of the great Zen eccentrics of China and Japan. His reclusive life and celebration of nature and the natural life also bring to mind his younger American contemporary, Thoreau. Ryokan's poetry is that of the mature Zen master, its deceptive simplicity revealing an art that surpasses artifice. Although Ryokan was born in eighteenth-century Japan, his extraordinary poems, capturing in a few luminous phrases both the beauty and the pathos of human life, reach far beyond time and place to touch the springs of humanity.

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## Customer Reviews

ONE ROBE, ONE BOWL : The Zen Poetry of Ryokan, translated and introduced by John Stevens. 85 pp. New York and Tokyo : Weatherhill, 1977 and reprinted. If you have already read John Stevens 'Mountain Tasting : Zen Haiku by Santoka Taneda,' you will certainly want to read 'One Robe, One Bowl.' And if you haven't yet read Stevens translations of Santoka, you'll want to after reading the present work. Both are beautiful books, and it's a pity that more people don't seem to find their way to them. John Stevens, who was born in Chicago, has lived in Japan since 1973. He is an ordained Soto Zen priest, has served as a member of the Buddhist Studies Department and as an aikido instructor at Tohoku College in Sendai, and is competent in both Japanese and Chinese. Stevens tells us in his brief, interesting, and informative Introduction that Ryokan's "verses are fresh and direct, without ornamentation or ostentation" (page 18), and that he has tried to

reproduce this in his translations. He seems to me to have succeeded brilliantly. Of the approximately 1000 Chinese and 400 Japanese-style poems that Ryokan left, Stevens has given us wonderfully readable translations, in a spare and colloquial English, of 100 of the former and 103 of the latter. Once having read them, I don't think you'll ever forget them. Ryokan (1758?-1831) is one of Japan's best-loved poets, and Stevens has managed to pack an awful lot about him into his brief 10-page Introduction. He tells us that Ryokan was born in the "snow country" of Echigo Province on the west coast of Japan. His family was fairly prosperous, the atmosphere in his home was literary and religious, and at the age of about nineteen, possibly as the result of some inner spiritual crisis, he decided to become a Buddhist monk and entered the local Zen temple, Kosho-ji. It was at this time that he took the name 'Ryokan' - 'ryo' signifying good; 'kan' signifying generosity and largeheartedness. It would be difficult to think of a more appropriate name than 'Good Heart' for the kind of person that Ryokan was, and it goes a great way towards explaining the great love the Japanese have for him. In him we find the heart of the mother - one who doesn't judge, one who understands, one who accepts and loves us as we are and for what we are - but in Ryokan's case one whose love extended to the whole universe and its myriad beings, whether human, animal, or plant, even the inanimate. After twelve years of Zen training, Ryokan left Kosho-ji and began a series of pilgrimages that lasted five years. He then returned to his native village, found an abandoned hermitage nearby, and was to spend most of the rest of his life there, meditating, writing, and interacting with the world around him. Stevens writes: "While his hermitage was deep in the mountains, he often visited the neighboring villages to play with the children, drink sake with the farmers, or visit his friends.... He respected everyone and bowed whenever he met anyone who labored, especially farmers. His love for children is proverbial among the Japanese. Often he spent the entire day playing with the children or picking flowers, completely forgetting his begging for that day.... He was continually smiling...." (page 12). The poems he wrote are largely concerned with events in his daily life, and can be read with enjoyment by anyone. Seemingly simple, they conceal real depths, depths that will be apparent to those familiar with Zen and with Buddhist ideas such as 'no-mind' and 'impermanence,' and with certain Buddhist symbols. But a knowledge of these is not really necessary to enjoy the poems, since Ryokan's main appeal is to our humanity, something we all share. Here is an example of one of the Chinese poems: "Once again, the children and I are fighting a battle using spring grasses. Now advancing, now retreating, each time with more refinement. Twilight - everyone has returned home; The bright, round moon helps me endure the loneliness" (page 35). Here is one of the Japanese poems: "Awakened by the cold - a light snow falls; the sound of wild geese. They also are returning home with hardship and suffering" (page

59). Sometimes it seems to me that much of modern literature is a literature of confusion. But what Ryokan has to offer is a literature of clarity. Ryokan was fully human. He had established contact with reality. His love and compassion were infinite. In this he becomes a model for us all.

This book has to rate as one of the most beautiful I have ever read. John Stevens does a masterly job of turning into English the original Japanese poetry. Ryokan's compassion and simplicity are retained, along with his penetrative insight into the human condition.

What a beautiful work this is all around. John Stevens translates this work brilliantly. This isn't a cold hard scholastic translation. This is a warm and touching work from two people, from two very different times, meeting at the heart of a timeless matter. There are a lot of reviews saying great things about this book. It lives up to all of them and more. This book is full of poems touching on the completely ordinary matter, of everyday life. This everyday life which contains everything we need/yearn for, yet almost always overlook. Ryokan was sort of an anti-establishment Zen student. Since establishments often usurp power and any value from things like Zen, leaving only inflated ego's ruling over cynical minds. Needless to say Ryokan wanted no part of this. Which is why he lived mostly alone in the often freezing mountains. He often writes of sheer loneliness. Which makes some people question his enlightenment. I think this is a very important point. Cause it shows how cold and unbending some people's view of Zen/enlightenment actually is. Who's to say an enlightened person can't feel lonely? Because Japan's greatest master Dogen never wrote of loneliness? Many masters of the past lived in monasteries full of students. If anything they probably had very little time alone. Nowhere's near enough time to develop any "lonely feelings." Hardly a fair comparison, that of Ryokan who lived in a little mountain hut, to a master of hundreds of disciples. Silly, but it doesn't seem to be too rare. I think this same thing that makes some Zen scholars critical, is what makes Ryokan so beloved by everyone else who knows of him. He not only felt a gamut of emotions but completely accepted them as a dynamic part of life. Often writing beautifully about them as in this book. Ryokan shows us a Zen life doesn't have to be a sterile and emotionless one. That's not to say he was a complete hermit, he was very fond of the common man especially the children of surrounding villages. Which is what these poems are all about. Playing with the children in the "grasses" (he was sometimes criticized by other adults for this.) Walking along uneven mountain trails. Gazing at misty bamboo groves with various creatures scurrying about. Drinking sake with the villagers from time to time. Gathering supplies for his mountain hut. Writing poems and/or calligraphy for people when they would visit him. These are the everyday events as

well as many others which these poems speak of. You will feel as if you are sitting next to Ryokan while he writes of the moon shining through the window, or the smoke rising from a single stick of incense. Although Ryokan was a Zen master in his own right, he isn't lecturing or preaching anything in his poetry. He never seemed to talk of Zen, practice or philosophy (although he seemed to take his own practice seriously.) His poems will appeal to anyone for their descriptive naturalness and down to earth feel. In a few simple lines, Ryokan shares his fascinating daily life with us. I would highly recommend this book for anyone even halfway into poetry or a spiritual and aware life. Poetry at its best. Enjoy!

John Stevens not only provides masterful translations of the work of Ryokan - he distills the life of the man in the concise introduction. The translations of these poems dealing primarily with daily life capture the depths seemingly without effort. Between that and the compassion that translates with the work, this volume has to be in the curriculum of all lovers of poetry. Truly zen in action.

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