

Curious Accounts of the Zen Master Ryōkan

by Kera Yoshishige

Despite Ryōkan's enduring reputation as a poet and calligrapher, it is above all the character of his daily life, its essential naturalness and simplicity, that earned him the affection of the men, women, and children of his native Echigo and continues to attract Japanese of all ages and backgrounds. Our principal firsthand source for Ryōkan's day-to-day existence is *Ryōkan zenji kiwa* (Curious Accounts of the Zen Master Ryōkan), a short document composed around 1845 or 1846 by Kera Yoshishige (1810–1859), the son of Ryōkan's friend and supporter Kera Shukumon (1765–1819). Ryōkan was a frequent guest in the Kera household, and from childhood, Yoshishige was in close personal contact with the Master, even receiving lessons from him in Japanese poetry. Although only twenty-one when Ryōkan died in 1831, Yoshishige remained devoted to his memory. In the *Kiwa*, he recorded various accounts of Ryōkan's life, based on his own experience with Ryōkan, on stories and details he had garnered from other friends and associates of the Master, and on anecdotes Ryōkan had personally related to him. As Yoshishige admits, the collection is strung together haphazardly, but this very quality imparts to the *Kiwa* a rustic authenticity, and it is regarded by Japanese scholars as our most reliable testimony to Ryōkan's actual way of life. The original manuscript is still in the possession of the Kera family and remained unpublished until 1959. Numbering of the sections follows that in Tōgō Toyoharu's *Ryōkan zenshū*, vol. 2, pp. 522–523. No numbers appear in the original manuscript.

1. The Master was always silent, his movements graceful and relaxed. As it's said: "If one's mind is broad, one's presence will be imbued with grandeur."¹

2. The Master always loved to drink, yet I never saw him drink to excess. Whether it was farmers or woodcutters, he enjoyed exchanging cups with them. They'd pay for his drinks, he for theirs: "This

one's on you; this one's on me . . ." and so on, always making sure that, by the end, each had exactly the same number of drinks.

3. The Master also loved to smoke. At first, he did not have his own pipe and tobacco,² and would always borrow other people's. But later, he acquired his own.

4. When the Master went visiting, he invariably left behind all sorts of personal belongings. Someone suggested: "Make a list of everything you have with you and, before leaving, just read it through." The Master said: "Fine idea!" After that, he would write a list of his belongings and before he left would make sure to read it through. Such a list is still preserved.

A similar list, itself said to have been forgotten by Ryōkan and still preserved at the home of his friends and patrons the Suzukis, includes the following items: head rest, hand towel, handkerchief, fan, coins, ball, playing stones, straw hat, leggings, hand guards, arm guards, cane, short robe, miscellaneous articles of clothing, tung oil, begging bowl, and bag. It closes with the note: "I must be sure to read this when I leave. If I don't, it's going to land me in trouble!"³

5. The Master always said: "I hate entertaining guests."

6. The Master said: "Whenever I visit someone's home and they ask me where I'm from, I just tell them: 'None of your business!'"

7. The Master's voice was clear and melodious. When he chanted the sūtras,⁴ the sound carried straight into people's hearts and naturally aroused faith in those who listened.

8. The Master was always joining the village children in their games, playing ball, matching playing stones and picking spring vegetables. When the Master passed the Jizōdō⁵ post station, the children would rush after him. First they would shout at him: "Master Ryōkan, one *kan*!"⁶ The Master would recoil, bending back in alarm. Next they would shout: "Master Ryōkan, two *kan*!" causing the Master to bend back still farther. As they continued in this way, increasing the amount from two *kan* to three and so on, the Master would bend back farther and farther, till he would nearly lose his balance and fall, at which point the children would burst into peals of delighted laughter.

When I⁷ was a child, the superintendent of the post station, Tomitori Kurata,⁸ visited our house. As it happened, the Master was also staying there, and said to him: "The children of your town are real little rascals. Don't let them do that to me any more. I'm old, and it's getting awfully hard for me."

I was sitting beside them and remarked to the Master: "Why do you put up with all this to play with them? Why don't you just stop?"

The Master replied: "I can't just stop what I've been doing for years."

The story behind this was that one year some people held an auction near the post station, and the Master came by to watch. One of the vendors shouted a price at him so loudly that the Master recoiled in alarm, bending all the way back, and ever since, the local children would pester him to play this game.

9. Wherever the Master went, he would join the children in their games. When playing with the children of a certain village, the Master would always pretend to be dead and lie down by the side of the road. The children would cover the Master with grass and leaves and play that they were burying him, laughing with delight.

One day, a crafty child came and, as soon as the Master began to play dead, squeezed the Master's nostrils shut with his fingers. Finally, the Master could stand it no longer and suddenly "revived."

The Zen Master seems to have done all this as part of his practice of breath control.⁹

10. The Master would go begging in my village, Makigahana.¹⁰ When he stood before the gate of the first house, someone would come up and say: "This place is Hanbei's," and the Master would tiptoe away. When he came to the place next door, it was the same thing: someone would tell him, "This is Hanbei's home," and the Master would slink off. In this manner, the Master would have to pass up the next ten houses, coming away empty-handed.

The story behind this is that a man called Hanbei had once attacked the Master in a drunken rage, so that the name Hanbei made the Master tremble, leading people to play this trick on him. It seems the Master never thought it suspicious that Hanbei had so many homes.

11. Once, during the time for transplanting rice seedlings, the Master was staying at our home. There was a certain crazy priest named Chikai, whose extreme arrogance had driven him insane. He

was always declaring, "I will found my own school of Buddhism in order to save sentient beings!" and compared himself to the eminent monks of the past, while disparaging his contemporaries as children. Hence, the great esteem accorded the Zen master Ryōkan made him seethe with envy.

On this particular day, Chikai got roaring drunk and announced that he was going to help till the fields. He arrived at our home, caked with mud. When he saw the Master was there, his long-festering anger suddenly exploded, and, without a word, he started to slap the Master with his soaking belt. All of this happened entirely without warning. The Master himself had no idea what it was all about, and since he did not make any attempt to escape, the people with him were alarmed and subdued the priest. They then pulled the Master into another room and threw the priest out of the house.

At dusk, a heavy rain began to fall. The Master came out of the room and asked casually: "Did that monk have his rain gear with him?" He said nothing more about the incident.

12. When I was a child, I was temporarily in residence at Hōtō-in in Sanjō,¹¹ studying calligraphy. The Master also came and stayed there. At that time, I had what was popularly referred to as a *barikobashi*.¹²

I told the Master: "Paint me a picture of Lord Sugawara.¹³ If you refuse, this thing will turn into a ghost and come get you at night!" The Master looked at it and appeared frightened. He then painted me the picture of Lord Sugawara, including Sugawara's title and a dedicatory verse. It remains in our home to this day.

13. When anyone asked the Master for a sample of his calligraphy, the Master would say: "After I practice and become good at it, I'll write something for you." At other times, in the grip of inspiration, he would toss off one sheet of calligraphy after another. He never complained about the quality of his materials. The Master would write his poems from memory, and that's why there were sometimes missing characters and some small variations in wording, so that there is no definitive version of his poems.

14. The Master loved grass-style calligraphy¹⁴ and is said to have studied Huai-su's *Tzu-hsü-t'ieh*¹⁵ and Sukemasa's *Akibagichō*.¹⁶ While at his hut at Kugami, the Master still seems to have had supplies of brushes, inkstones, and paper, and it is said that visitors also saw scrap

paper on which he practiced. But after moving to Shimazaki,¹⁷ he ran out of supplies and, whenever he had the chance, would go to people's homes in order to do calligraphy. No doubt, this is the origin of the comic verse the Master composed: "Yesterday at the temple, today at the doctor's."

Yoshishige is apparently referring to a Japanese poem by Ryōkan:

How pitiful, having neither brush nor ink!
Yesterday I went to the temple
Today I'll go to the doctor's

There is another poem in a similar vein:

Not even a brush—how pathetic I am!
This morning again I take my staff
And knock at the temple gate

15. When the Master was staying in his hut at Kugami, he kept next to the hearth a small jar containing some soy extract. Whenever he had any leftovers from his meal, he'd place them inside the jar. He would eat this mixture even on summer days and, when guests came, would offer it to them as well. No one else could bring himself to eat it. But the Master did not mind and seemed oblivious to the stench. "Maggots may breed in this," he said, "but when you scoop some into a bowl, they just crawl away on their own. So there's really no harm in eating it."

16. When my elder brother was married, the Master arrived carrying an old box containing a fan¹⁸ and delivered a formal speech of congratulation. My grandfather asked the Master: "Who taught you this kind of worldly thing?" The Master answered innocently: "The wife of Hokusen of Jizōdō,¹⁹ *she* taught me."

17. The Master loved to play go. Losing, however, upset him. Once he played go with a certain Tomitori, headman of Jizōdō, winning nearly every game. His host, pretending to be angry, said: "It's unforgivably rude to visit someone's home as a guest and then beat him. I forbid you to come here any more!" Devastated, the Master left.

On his way back, the Master stopped at our home. He seemed very dejected, as if deeply troubled by something. When my grandfather asked what was the matter, the Master told him: "I have been cut

off by the Master of Jizōdō." "How terrible!" my grandfather said. "I'll go and apologize for you."

Next day, they went together to the Tomitori home. My grandfather pretended to apologize for the Master's rudeness the day before. All the while, the Master stood outside, not daring to come in. Only when he was formally invited did he finally enter. What's more, I understand that no sooner had the Master stepped through the door than they started playing again!

This took place before I was born, but I learned of it from the late priest Kankoku.²⁰

18. The Master would sometimes play *go* for money, and people would often let him win. It seems, however, that when the Master accumulated a lot of money, he had nowhere to keep it. He once declared: "People always worry about not having enough money, but I worry about having too much!"

In the town of Izumozaki, Ryōkan's birthplace, a legend survives of a *go* contest between Ryōkan and Sekigawa Mansuke (n.d.). Mansuke was a close friend of Ryōkan's, and people who sought samples of Ryōkan's calligraphy would often employ Mansuke as a middleman.

One clear autumn day when Mansuke was picking persimmons in the garden behind his home, he turned to find Ryōkan standing there, gazing up dreamily. When Mansuke climbed down from the tree, Ryōkan said: "Let's play *go* today."

Go was Mansuke's favorite pastime, and he immediately brought out his *go* board. But first he had an idea: "Just playing plain *go* is no fun. Why don't we bet something instead?" he proposed. "If you win—"

"It's getting cold," Ryōkan said, "so you can give me a quilted robe."

"And if I win?" asked Mansuke.

"I have nothing to give you," Ryōkan admitted.

"Then why not do some calligraphy?" suggested Mansuke, glancing toward the paper he had piled high on his desk.

"All right," agreed Ryōkan, having no choice.

They began to play, but Mansuke was Ryōkan's superior at *go* and quickly beat him. He then insisted that Ryōkan do some calligraphy, and reluctantly Ryōkan took a fan from the desk, on which he wrote:

Picking persimmons
My balls feel the chill
Of the autumn wind

Mansuke read the poem and smiled bitterly. He went on to win the next round as well, and Ryōkan wrote out the same poem again. After this had been repeated three times, Mansuke could finally bear it no longer.

"Three times for that same poem about balls is too much!" he protested.

"Well," Ryōkan replied, "you won the same game of go three times, didn't you? So I wrote the same poem three times, too."

19. The Master never displayed excessive joy or anger. One never heard him speaking in a hurried manner, and in all his daily activities, in the way he would eat and drink, rise and retire, his movements were slow and easy, as if he were an idiot.

20. On the Master's personal belongings, such as his bamboo hat, he would write: "This is mine; really, it's mine!" In our family home is a copy of the *Muyūshū*²¹ that the Master carried with him, and this, too, is inscribed: "Really mine."

21. Inoue Kirimaro²² greatly revered the Master and often visited his hut at Kugami. He once asked the Master about the virtuous men of the present day, and the Master told him about my father. From then on, Kirimaro became a regular visitor at our home.

22. The Master often cared for those who were ill, doing everything he could, helping them to eat and drink, to sit up and lie down. He was also skilled at massage and applying moxa.²³ People would ask him: "Please come tomorrow and give me a moxa treatment." But the Master would not make any promises, telling them: "We'll see about tomorrow tomorrow." Was this because he felt that casually promising things showed a lack of sincerity? Or was it, perhaps, that one cannot really be sure whether tomorrow one will be dead or alive?

23. The Master would never slander others or utter empty praise. Once when a village headman erected for himself a grand residence, however, the Master was heard to remark: "This is what it means when they say that being greedy makes you foolish."

24. Once the Master was ill with a cold, resting at the home of someone in Na'nokaichi.²⁴ The following morning, he awoke to find that a folding screen had been placed around his bed. The Master said: "No wonder I'm sick—they've put up a screen covered with Kōsai's²⁵ calligraphy!"

25. The things the Master hated were the calligraphy of calligraphers, the poems of poets, and thematic poetry contests.²⁶

26. When anyone presented the Master with special calligraphy paper or poem cards²⁷ and asked for his calligraphy, he would simply write out Chinese or Japanese poems any way he pleased, with no rules governing the way in which he formed and arranged the characters. It was as if he was oblivious to the standards then in vogue for writing poetry.

27. At one time, the Master attended a formal tea ceremony, a so-called *koicha*.²⁸ The Master drained the entire tea bowl, then realized that another guest was sitting next to him. So he spit the tea back into the bowl and offered it to the man. The guest, praying for the Buddha's protection, drank the tea.

28. On the same occasion, the Master picked a piece of dried snot from his nose, and, trying not to attract any attention, went to place it beside him on his right. The guest there pulled back his sleeve in disgust. So the Master tried to place it on his left; but the guest there also recoiled. Realizing that he was stuck, the Master simply placed the snot back in his nose.

29. At one time, the Master traveled through a certain post station. As he passed by a brothel, a prostitute grabbed his sleeve and began to cry. The Master could not understand the reason for her behavior. It seems that when only a child, she had been sold and taken to this distant place, so that she never knew her parents and always thought longingly of them.²⁹ The night before, her father had visited her in a dream, and seeing the Master, she had mistaken him for her father. The Master himself told this story. I was very young and did not grasp all the details, but later heard the story from someone who knew.

30. The Master stopped to rest on top of a mountain. Without realizing it, he took the same road down again and proceeded to beg at a nearby house. Recognizing him, someone exclaimed: "Why, that's the same monk who was just here!" The Master was taken aback and fled home.

31. The Master stayed the night at the home of a certain Yamada in Yoita.³⁰ In the house was a screen decorated with a painting of an animal that the Master particularly liked. Once, seeing that no one was about, he placed himself in front of the painting, imitating the animal's

pose. Without being noticed, the lady of the house came and observed him. When the Master saw her, he asked: "Do you know what I'm doing?"

"Your Reverence is imitating the animal in the picture," she replied.

"My, you're smart!" the Master exclaimed in amazement. "But please don't tell anyone. I don't want to upset the servants!"

32. At midsummer, it was the local custom for everyone to dance through the night. It was as if people had all gone mad, and the Master loved it. He would wrap a towel around his head and, pretending to be a woman, mingle with the crowd and dance. One man recognized the Master and, standing near him, remarked: "What an attractive young woman! I wonder whose daughter she is."

When the Master overheard this, he was thrilled. He bragged to people: "Someone saw me and wanted to know whose daughter I was!"

33. When I went to visit the Master at his hut in Shimazaki, he measured the width of the opening of his iron tea kettle with a piece of straw and then went out, taking the straw with him. After a while, he returned carrying a bottle of sake, which he then placed inside the kettle and heated. The Master had calculated that unless the bottle was the right size to fit the opening of the kettle, he would not be able to warm the sake.

34. I asked the Master: "To learn about poetry, what work should I read?"

The Master told me: "You should read the *Man'yōshū*."³¹

"I can't understand the *Man'yōshū*," I said.

The Master replied: "Then just stick to whatever you *can* understand."

On another occasion, the Master said: "The *Kokinshū*³² is relatively acceptable. But the poetry collections composed after that aren't worth reading at all."

35. The Master made an exhaustive study of Japanese phonetics, thoroughly mastering their essentials. In our province, the works of Motoori and Mabuchi³³ were unknown, so the Master was truly a pioneer. When I was young, I asked the Master about this, and he showed me the principles of declension. He would give the first declension, and then if the student could not come up with the rest, he would remain silent. Only when the student had truly mastered the principles

of grammar would he go on teaching him. How I regret that I was too young to grasp the essentials of the Master's instruction! Now I bitterly realize what I missed.

36. The Master said: "I spent an entire winter at my hut studying phonetics and mastered their true essence."

37. When the Master was at his hut on Mount Kugami, bamboo shoots sprouted in the outhouse. Using a candle, he tried to burn holes in the roof so the shoots could keep growing but ended by burning down the outhouse.

38. When the Master carried firewood on his back, he passed the rope that bound the wood under his crotch.³⁴

39. Hearing people say, "It's such fun to find money!" the Master threw some of his own coins on the ground and tried picking them up. But it did not give him any pleasure. "They were just trying to trick me," he thought. After throwing his coins away like this several times, the Master finally forgot where he'd dropped them. Searching and searching, he found the coins, and then at last felt happy. "They weren't deceiving me after all!" he exclaimed.

40. In the local dialect, when the rice plants ripen, people say they "*bonaru*." Someone remarked: "The word *bonaru* means 'to roar.'" Having overheard this, the Master wanted to listen to the roaring of the rice and spent all night wandering through the fields.

41. In farming villages, after the autumn harvest, the unhulled rice was wrapped in straw bundles, which were hung from the rafters.³⁵ The rice would ferment slightly inside the straw, making it feel warm. The Master went back to his hut and tried hanging an empty straw bundle from his own rafter.

42. On summer evenings in the stables, the grooms would twist together bundles of straw and hang them from the rafters with rope. When the horses were bitten by mosquitoes, they would rub against the straw, and the mosquitoes would be driven off. Seeing these bundles, the Master asked what they were for and was told they were used for driving away mosquitoes. He promptly returned to his hut and hung one up himself.

43. The Master was caught in a downpour and took shelter from the rain beside a stone Jizō³⁶ equipped with a straw rainhat. A passerby recognized the Master and brought him to his house, where he asked

for a sample of his calligraphy. The Master then wrote out in large characters twelve copies of the "Alphabet Song."³⁷

44. A certain Manzō, owner of a confectionary in Niigata,³⁸ was a great admirer of the Master's calligraphy and wanted the Master to draw the characters for his shop sign. Carrying paper and brushes, he pursued the Master and finally caught up with him at the house of a certain person near the Jizōdō post station. Manzō pleaded so earnestly that the Master finally agreed to do what he asked. Later that day, the Master remarked to someone: "Today, I ran into disaster!"

This year, I passed through Niigata and noticed that the Master's shop sign still hangs outside the confectionary. As the memories of that time came rushing back, I found myself wandering alone from place to place.

45. There was a thief who broke into the Master's hut at Kugami. Finding nothing to steal, he pulled at the Master's sleeping mat, attempting to remove it without waking him. Pretending to be asleep, the Master rolled over, allowing the thief to pull the mat out from under him and carry it off.

46. There was a certain doctor named Shōtei, who asked the Master: "I want to be rich. How can I get more money?"

The Master told him: "Just be a good doctor and don't be greedy."

47. On another occasion, when someone asked the same question, the Master said: "If you borrow money, be sure to pay it back on time."

48. The Master stayed several nights at our home. Young and old became harmonious, and a peaceful atmosphere filled the house for several days after his departure. Just one evening of talking with the Master made us feel that our hearts had been purified. The Master never held forth on the scriptures or classics or on the importance of ethics. Sometimes he would be in the kitchen tending the fire, sometimes in the parlor practicing meditation. In his conversation he never alluded to classical poetry or ethical teachings, and his manner was indescribably casual and relaxed. It was just his own innate goodness that naturally guided others.

49. The Master once spent the night in the home of a family belonging to the Nichiren school.³⁹ When he began to recite a sūtra,

one of the members of the household tugged at his sleeve and demanded that he stop. When he told me this, the Master laughed.

50. The details of the Master's everyday life are fully revealed in his poems, so I have not had to repeat them here, recording only certain items of exceptional interest.

51. In the Master's entire life, there was nothing that could be considered miraculous or supernatural, apart from a single episode. Several days after the Master had died and been placed in his coffin, a nun arrived. Unable to bear her terrible grief, she begged to be allowed one last look at the Master, and finding it impossible to refuse her, they were finally obliged to open the coffin. The Master's posture was still perfectly erect, and his appearance dignified, just as if he were alive.

52. The Master exuded a divine energy, and his appearance was that of a hermit-immortal. He was tall and spare, with a prominent nose and shining eyes, warm and gentle, yet strict and fair, without any trace of sanctimoniousness. His lofty virtue was quite beyond my own limited vision. Now as I reflect on the Master's character, I find none to compare with him. Kameda Bōsai⁴⁰ said: "His like has not been seen since the priest Kisen."⁴¹

53. The Master was given lodging for a certain period at Kan-shōji,⁴² in our village. Since I was too young, however, it was not possible for me to meet him at that time.

54. There was a haiku poet named Hajō,⁴³ who lamented the poor quality of his calligraphy. The Master chanced to hear of this and told him: "Don't be tormented by envy of others. Your own calligraphy will naturally perfect itself." From that time, Hajō found that his writing came more easily. This was told me by Hajō's disciple Jakusui.

55. The Master traveled on pilgrimage through other provinces before settling at Gogō-an on Mount Kugami and afterward in a hut in the same village in the precincts of the Otogo shrine. In old age, he went to live behind the Notoya⁴⁴ family home in Shimazaki. His reason was to escape the burdens of gathering firewood and drawing water.

56. In Tosa,⁴⁵ a traveler from Edo named Banjō⁴⁶ shared the Master's lodging for a night. Banjō's account of this experience is recorded in his writings.

57. The items I have recorded here were set down simply as they came to mind. They are not arranged in chronological order.

58. I do not know the reasons for the Master's originally becoming a Buddhist monk. I must ask the priest HENCHŌ.⁴⁷

59. Story of the bamboo shoot thief; essay on the precepts; discussions on waka and kanshi; episode of Kengi's folding screen; story of Master Bundai's question; poetry exchange with Bōsai; story of Suibara Kakusho.⁴⁸

60. One day, the Master picked chrysanthemums from the garden of someone's home near the Yamada station. The owner, who was watching, accused the Master of being a flower thief. "However," he told the Master, "if you paint me a picture of this and add an inscription in your calligraphy, I'll let you off." The Master then took a brush and wrote: "Image of the Monk Ryōkan making off with a flower in the morning. In the expectation that it will be preserved for later generations. . . ."

61. This was the poem given Master Ryōkan by his master⁴⁹ and cherished by him all his life:

To the Hermitage-Master Ryōkan

Ryōkan! How nice to be like a fool
 for then one's Way is grand beyond measure
 Free and easy, letting things take their course—
 who can fathom it?
 I therefore entrust to you this staff of wild wisteria
 Whenever you lean it against the wall
 Let it bring the peace of a noonday nap

Kanshi (Poems in Chinese)

My Poems Aren't Poems

The first day of summer
I lazily pull on my robes
By the water's edge
 willows have turned a deep green
On the opposite bank
 peach and plum blossoms
 scatter in the morning breeze
I amble along, plucking blades of wild grass
And casually knock at a brushwood gate
Butterflies cavort in the garden in the south
Turnip flowers choke the bamboo fence in the east
Here, in an atmosphere of perfect ease
 the long summer days stretch endlessly
So remote a spot is naturally striking
Easily moved by beauty—such is my nature
I take a few phrases
 and they just turn into poems

Who says that my poems are poems?
My poems aren't poems at all
When you understand
 that my poems really aren't poems
Then we can talk poetry together

Inspiration

Shaving my head, becoming a monk
I spent years on the road
 pushing aside wild grasses
 peering hard into the wind
Now, everywhere I go
 people just hand me paper and brush:
"Do some calligraphy!" "Write me a poem!"

At Saitō's Country House

Five or six miles from town¹
I fall in with a woodcutter
Green pines stand erect lining the roadside
From across the valley
 drifts the fragrance of wild plum blossoms
Coming here, it always seems as if I'm expected
The moment I set down my staff, I feel at home
In the old pond, fish are busily swimming
The forest is silent;
 the spring day stretches endlessly before me
What's in the house?
One long table piled with books of poetry
Utterly at ease, I loosen my belt and robes
And picking a few phrases, try to make up a poem²
At twilight when I step out the door for a stroll
Spring quail are startled into the air

The stone stairs are bright with fresh layers of moss
A breeze carries the aroma of cedar and pine
It seems the rains are over at last
I send one of the children to buy some country wine
And after I'm drunk, toss off a few lines of calligraphy

Midwinter, the eleventh month
The season for wet, heavy snow
A thousand peaks, a single hue
Myriad paths with scarcely a traveler
Yesterday's wanderings seem like a dream
Deep in retreat in my thatch hut
All night long I burn pieces of roots
And quietly read the poems of long ago

I love the remoteness of this place
And taking my staff, traveled straight here
A cold sky, between the eighth and ninth months
A garden grove after the rains
The dog remembers me from last year
On the eastern fence, autumn arrives
 with flowering chrysanthemums
The people here are plain, like those long ago
So secluded a spot is serene of itself
In the house, what does one find?
Books of poetry and prose covering the floor
By nature I shun the clamor of the world
When I come here to visit, I like to stay
The mind of poetry, the mind of Zen
Come together effortlessly

With My Begging Bowl

Begging

When the spring weather begins to turn pleasant
I take my staff and walk east into town
In the gardens, the willows are tinged deep green
Duckweed drifts on the surface of ponds
From my begging bowl comes the aroma of rice
 the offerings of a thousand homes
My heart has forsaken splendor and glory
Following the path of the buddhas of old
I beg my way from door to door

On the first day of the eighth month
I go into town to beg
At dawn, the doors of a thousand homes are flung open
The smoke of a myriad hearths slants through the air
Last night's rain has washed the road clean
And an autumn wind rustles the rings on my staff³
I take my time begging
The universe is vast without end

Shelter from the Rain

Today, out begging, I'm caught in a shower
And take shelter for a while inside an old shrine
Laugh at me if you will, caught like this
 with nothing but a water bottle and begging bowl
But mine is a life of poetry
 with worldly cares all left behind

The warbler sings so tranquilly
The spring day stretches lazily on
I sit and meditate inside
But the mind of spring naturally won't stay still
So I take my begging bag and staff
And set off carefree down the road⁴

Begging, I arrive at your house
In the refreshing cool of early autumn
The garden is sparse
 with spiny chestnut burrs scattered about
In the chilly air, the cicadas' voices are stilled
My nature is to be free of attachment
Whatever I do, my thoughts are at ease
I sit and read the *Lotus Sūtra*⁵
Rolling and unrolling its eight scrolls
 which I keep always by my seat

My makeshift hut stands beside the Kannon temple⁶
A thousand green trees my only companions
Now and then I put on my robe
 take my bowl and go into town
I walk all over, begging for food
And offer it respectfully to myself!

Empty Bowl

Clear skies ring with the honk of wild geese
On deserted hills, leaves whirl in the wind
Twilight on a smoky village road
Carrying an empty begging bowl and walking home alone

Will my stupidity and stubbornness ever end?
Poor and alone—that's my life
Twilight on the streets of a ramshackle town
Going home again with an empty bowl

At daybreak, I take my staff
And go into town to beg
The town is no longer as it was
Hills and ponds seem to have changed
My face is lashed by a bitter wind
 harsh with the frost's lingering chill
My begging bag weighs on my aged shoulders
I walk past the places where I used to play
But all I find is pines and cedars
 locked in icy mist

One begging bowl holds the rice of a thousand homes
A thin robe, and my whole body feels light
Having eaten my fill, what's left for me to do?
Grow old in the great peace, soaring calm and free

All day I gaze on smoky villages
Walking and walking, begging as I go
Night falls, and the long mountain road stretches before me
The wind bitter enough to tear out your whiskers
My threadbare robe trembles like swirling fog⁷
My wooden begging bowl grows
 ever stranger with age
I've never minded hardship, hunger, and cold
Such has always been the lot of people like me

How many years since I came to this place?
How many changes have there been?
When I see people now, I don't know who they are
And they don't know me
To them, I'm just another beggar at the crossroads

On the first day of the eighth month
 I go into town to beg
 White clouds follow my spirited footsteps
 And an autumn wind rustles the rings on my staff
 At the crack of dawn
 the doors of a thousand homes are flung open
 Noon finds me at the edge of town
 passing among banana plants and bamboo
 I wander freely, east or west
 A wine shop, a fish shop—what difference does it make?
 By looking at things squarely, I can make even
 the Mountain of Swords⁸ crumble to dust
 By just taking a stroll, I can dry up the
 boiling cauldron of hell⁹
 The Buddha himself taught this
 Transmitting it directly to Mahākāshyapa¹⁰
 And since then it's been handed down
 for over twenty-seven hundred years
 I, too, am a follower of Shākyamuni¹¹
 And revel in the simple majesty of a single robe and bowl
 Don't you see? Vimalakīrti said:
 "One who is impartial, receiving food of any sort
 Has realized the impartiality of Dharma"¹²
 You must grasp this directly for yourself
 Otherwise you'll spend donkey's years
 just mired in the same old rut