

Katō Kiichi : Zen Priest Ryōkan and Nun Teishin: Immaculate Love⁽¹⁾

Translated by Fujisato Kitajima and Sanford Goldstein

During Ryōkan's life, he had three major encounters. In the first he met his teacher Ōmori Shiyō, a scholar of Chinese classics. Next he encountered the Zen master Kokusen of the Sōto sect. And finally he met the Buddhist nun Teishin who became Ryōkan's disciple in the writing of waka. If Ryōkan had not met her, perhaps there would have been no final evolution of his life. Nun Teishin was of total importance to Ryōkan.



Nun Teishin's Waka Monument

She was born in Kansei 10 (1798) near Hirakata Shrine along the Kaki River in the city of Nagaoka, the address now being I-chōme, Omote-machi. Teishin was the second daughter of Okumura Gohei, a samurai of low status. Teishin's childhood name was Masu. Apparently the Okumura family from the feudal domain of Nagaoka was poor

with its low samurai status, and it has been said that Teishin worked hard, her endeavors including calligraphy and reading.

When she was seventeen, Masu married Seki Nagaomi, a doctor in Koide town. At this time Ryōkan was fifty-seven and living in Gogō-an. His fame had already spread widely. In Koide Park in the town of Koide, Teishin is commemorated with a monument on which two of her waka in her own calligraphy are carved:

Bush Clover at Home

unaware
that the master has left us
are these autumn bush clover,
vigorous now in their thick blooms
in the garden of my old town

to my old home I return,
my sleeves wet with dew,
only to find scattered
along the hedge in full bloom
these autumn bush clover

In Bunsei 3 (1820), five years after Masu's marriage, she returned to her parents' home. It was believed that the reason she returned was due to her husband's death. But the truth is that she lost her husband through divorce. They had no children.

Within a year after returning to her parental home, Masu became the disciple of Nun Minryu and Nun Shinryu, both sisters at Ennōji Temple in Kashiwazaki. There Masu was given the name Teishin-ni.

At the present time nothing of Ennōji Temple remains, but apparently it was close to Cape Banjin near the Sea of Japan on the western side of Kashiwazaki.

Why did Teishin go all the way to Kashiwazaki? Her childhood nurse had come from that region, so Teishin had gone to Kashiwazaki as a child. She had close ties with this area, familiar as she was with its inhabitants. Teishin moved from Nagaoka to Koide, both of which were landlocked areas with deep winter snows, and then to Kashiwazaki, itself near the sea. There she started her new life as a nun at Ennōji Temple.



Nun Teishin's Waka Monument



The Enmadō

Teishin was twenty-three at this time. Fair-complexioned, she was thought to be good-looking. For six years she served her apprenticeship at Ennōji Temple. That she was acquainted with the Kimura family in those days is known

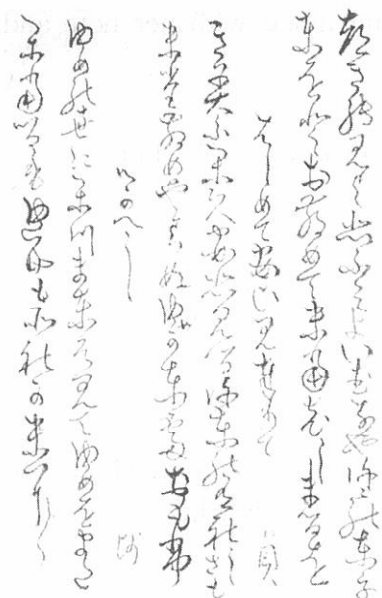
from her letters. Furthermore, she was said to have traveled to Izumozaki as a religious mendicant. There she met people who knew Ryōkan, and perhaps she had a chance to see some of Ryōkan's calligraphy. She must have strengthened

her deep feeling of respect for Ryōkan.

In Bunsei 9 (1826), Teishin at twenty-nine years of age moved to the Enmadō in Fukushima, the temple located in the outskirts of Nagaoka, and she began her new life as an independent nun. The Enmadō itself was in ruins and was levelled, but it was rebuilt in November, Heisei 7 (1995). A monument to Teishin has been built in a small park there with the following waka inscribed with Teishin's calligraphy, the poem taken from Teishin's waka collection *Moshiogusa* (*A Miscellany*):

sufficient they are
to prepare my morning meal
these fallen leaves
scattered during the night,
the wind's compassion for me

For sixteen years until Teishin became forty-four, she lived in the Enmadō. During this period she met Ryōkan, and the sacred love between them flourished. Teishin sat with him throughout the night on his death bed. Four years after Ryōkan's death, she completed a collection of Ryōkan's waka entitled *Hachisu no Tsuyu* (*Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf*), which remains the first collection of Ryōkan's waka poems in Japan.



Hachisu no Tsuyu

The original version of *Hachisu no Tsuyu* which Teishin compiled is now owned by the Sofia Center in the Kashiwazaki Municipal Library. The center has many of Teishin's calligraphic works and other valuable belongings, most of these collected by Mr. Nakamura Tohachi, owner of a shipping agency. The Nakamura family contributed all these items at one time, and these are now kept under guard at the Nakamura Bunko.

The front page of *Hachisu no Tsuyu* is blank, its fifty-one sheets of plain paper (35×25 cm) folded in two and bound Japanese-style into a

booklet. All was written in Teishin's calligraphy.

The Preface runs from page one to seven, its opening line as follows: "Zen Priest Ryōkan was the first-born son of the Tachibana family, but at the age of two score and two he had his head shaved and became a Buddhist priest." Later "two score and two" was corrected to "eighteen." But it is not clear if this correction was made by Teishin herself. At any rate, she seems to have been confused about the year of Ryōkan's head-shaving ceremony and that of his going to Entsūji Temple in Okayama Prefecture. At the end of the preface is the author's "Written by Teishin on May first in Tenpō 6 [1835]." So we know that *Hachisu no Tsuyu* was completed in the fourth year after Ryōkan's death. From page 9 comes the text of this collection of waka poems, including *chōka*, *sedōka*, tanka, and haiku-161 poems in all. The first half of the collection contains only Ryōkan's waka poems, but in the latter half are waka which Ryōkan and Teishin exchanged. The beginning waka are ones connected to Teishin's visiting Ryōkan for the first time.

In Bunsei 9 (1826), Teishin heard Ryōkan had moved to the Kimura family estate, which she was also familiar with, and she visited him in his small shelter in Wajima Village. She brought with her the souvenir of a *temari* ball she herself had made. She had been yearning to see Ryōkan for many years. Perhaps her heart fluttered in anticipation, but Ryōkan was not at home. All she could do was return to the Enmadō. But she left him the souvenir along with her note and poem.

"I hear that the Master likes to play with the *temari* ball," wrote Teishin:

playing on Buddha's road,
you never tire
of bouncing your *temari* ball
just like this,
you inexhaustible Dharma

Teishin's poem means "Your bouncing ball is just to praise the inexhaustible teachings of Buddha, isn't it?" Ryōkan soon replied with the following:

bounce the *temari* ball–
one two three four five six seven
eight nine ten
and ten once reached
it starts all over again!

Ryōkan's response is "Now you must try to bounce the *temari* ball. Like the ball which bounces up to ten and again starts at one, the mercy of the Buddha is boundless." At the same time Ryōkan appeals to her to join in the game with him and to talk with him about the path of the Buddha.

In this same year Teishin again visited Ryōkan at his hut and could finally meet him face to face. Teishin wrote:

Meeting the Master for the First Time

at last
meeting you face to face,
I am filled with joy,
but if this itself is a dream,
never wake me from my slumber

The master's reply:

in this world of dreams
let us both slumber,
and as for these dreams we speak about,
whether of dreams or actually dreaming,
let us drift in the stream of eternity

Said Teishin, "I am really pleased to see you. It's something like a dream." Ryōkan answered: "This life itself is a dream. If it is a dream, let it continue." They talked and talked late into the night, promised to meet again, and parted. But Teishin could not return to Ryōkan that easily. Innocent as a child, Ryōkan urged her to come to see him.

have you forgotten?
or have you lost your way?
during these many days
I have waited and waited
for the arrival that does not happen

Wrote Teishin:

busied by
chores at my hermitage,
I am imprisoned
against the desire of my heart
that wants to fly to you

During this period there is evidence that because Teishin lived at some other residence, she was unable to see Ryōkan often.

As for her own calligraphy, it is superb. Its style resembles Ryōkan's, but hers is more like that in *Akihagijō*, which served as a copybook for Ryōkan. We can imagine the figure of Teishin as she diligently studies calligraphy, copying the *Akihagijō* in her small residence at the Enmadō and wishing to get closer to Ryōkan's masterly style of calligraphy. Wrote Ryōkan:

that pledge
made before Buddha
on Vulture's Peak,
never forget it
no matter how alienated we are from the world

And Teishin responded:

that pledge
on Vulture's Peak
made before the Buddha
will I never forget
no matter how alienated I am from the world

"As a person who preaches the teachings of Buddha," says Ryōkan, "please do not forget the pledge before the Buddha." And answering his poem in perfect harmony, Teishin replies, "No, I will never forget it." They valued each other's purity of heart as servants of Buddha.

From the Enmadō in Fukushima on the outskirts of Nagaoka where Teishin lived to Ryōkan's hut offered by the Kimura family in Wajima Village required an entire day's travel. She had to cross the Shinano River by small ferry and then the difficult ridge called Shionori Pass from Yoita. How many times did she make this mountain journey? Talking to each other and exchanging waka, Ryōkan and Teishin joined their inner spirits, and their immaculate love deepened:

shall we compose waka?
or bounce the *temari* ball?
or saunter into the fields?
let's enjoy ourselves
in whatever way you wish
(Teishin)

let's compose waka
or bounce the *temari* ball
or saunter into the fields--
only a single mind do I have
and so I cannot decide on this or that
(Ryōkan)

Teishin asks Ryōkan: "Shall we write poems now? Or bounce the Japanese ball? Or go out to the fields and play? Today let's spend an entire day doing what Master Ryōkan likes."

Then Ryōkan replies: "Compose tanka? Bounce the *temari*? Go out to the fields? So many pleasurable things there are that I cannot decide one way or the other."

In these two tanka we do not feel any of that forty-years-of-age difference between Ryōkan and Teishin. In what we can call an excellent tanka, we can imagine Ryōkan's beaming face.

It was typical of Ryōkan to show compassion for all living creatures as well as affection for them. His great warm-heartedness reached the ultimate when Teishin appeared in his life.

At that time Ryōkan was over seventy. Usually a man over seventy begins to feel exhausted from weakness, his health in decline. But it has been noted that

due to Teishin, Ryōkan's life force was vividly revived along with his passionate nature. And with his reborn life, his poems and calligraphy were rejuvenated as well. The free and easy yet fresh style of Ryōkan was completed at this juncture.

But these happy days lasted only four years. In the first year of Tenpō (1830), Ryōkan's health began to deteriorate from the summer onward, and he was bedridden. That winter he was confined to his hut and seldom met anyone.

as soon as spring comes,
leave your thatched hut
and visit me;
I have long been waiting
for you to come to me

Succumbing to his difficult disease, he sings, "I want to see you as soon as spring comes." This superb poem by Ryōkan is heart-wrenching. Hearing the rumor that Ryōkan's illness was quite serious, Teishin was shocked and rushed to Wajima Village where his hut was located:

each day and hour
I have looked forward
to seeing you,
and now that I see you again,
what else is there to yearn for?

To paraphrase Ryōkan's poem: "The woman I have been waiting for has come at last. Now I have nothing more to yearn for." On seeing her, he was overwhelmed, his mind in a state of pure rejoicing.

As she watched over the dying Ryōkan day and night, Teishin wrote: "I feel sad to think our inevitable parting is nearing." Recognizing her enormous grief, Ryōkan bids Teishin farewell: "Now I am dying and I will show you everything, the front side and back side of this self of mine. But considering that the two sides of my life are one, so are this world and the world beyond. To be and not to be are the same. Do not grieve that much."

Wrote Teishin:

destined we are
to part from the world
of life by death,
and still, still, I cannot bear
this sorrow of our parting

Ryōkan's haiku to her:

everywhere I look
these falling maple leaves
front and back, back and front

Wrote Teishin: "In Tenpō 2 [1831] in the Year of the Rabbit, on January 6th, Ryōkan met his death at the age of seventy-four."

After Ryōkan's death, Teishin began searching for Ryōkan's scattered poems, and four years later in May, Tenpō 6 (1835), she completed *Hachisu no Tsuyu*. This volume is the first collection of Ryōkan's poems. In this same period Teishin's poems and fine calligraphy were highly valued. Teishin and Chiyojo (1703-1775) in Kaga and Nun Rengetsu (1791-1875) in Kyoto have been called the three great women poets in the Edo era.



Tōunji Temple

Six years after the completion of *Hachisu no Tsuyu*, Teishin returned to Kashiwazaki and entered Tōunji Temple. Her entering this temple was probably because Nun Minryu at Ennōji Temple, whose disciple Teishin once was, was not qualified enough to authorize Teishin's renouncing the world.

Teishin lived in Kashiwazaki for ten years as the sole resident of the Shakadō. While she had been away at her home in Nagaoka, a great fire completely ruined the Shakadō. Now we are able to find only a few stone images at the site of her ex-hermitage. *Hachisu no Tsuyu*, which she always carried with her, was safe, but it seems that all her other belongings, including Ryōkan's letters and poems,

were destroyed in the fire. Then she moved to the newly built Fugu-an near Shinkōji Temple. Now Fugu-an no longer exists, only a sign standing to indicate the site.

During the period of her stay at Fugu-an, Teishin left excellent samples of her calligraphy and poems in addition to her unstinting help in the publication of *Zen Master Ryōkan's Posthumous Manuscripts*, the first complete collection of Ryōkan's poems in Japan. It was published in Keiō 3 (1867). Teishin passed away on February 11 in Meiji 5 (1872) at age of seventy-five.



Nun Teishin's Portrait

The picture shown at the left is said to be a portrait of Teishin just before her death. It is exhibited at the Municipal Museum of Kashiwazaki. Usually a woman said to have been beautiful hates to leave a portrait of her ugliness in old age, but Teishin, just as Ryōkan did, accepted herself as she was.

In the upper space of this portrait is Teishin's farewell poem:

waves out at sea
blown by the wind,
surging in and then ebbing,
in just this way
is my behavior in the world

This poem reminds us of Teishin's pleasant personality. It was natural for her to accept things as they were; she respected the figure of her life as it was, this acceptance comparable to the teachings of Ryōkan. Is it too much to say that this farewell poem helps us recall Ryōkan's gentle, breeze-like character?

Teishin's tomb was erected on a hill in the graveyard at the back of Tōunji Temple. On the premises of Tōunji is a stone monument on which a poem by Teishin and one by Ryōkan appear, the poems indicating their love for one another. The monument was erected in November of Heisei 3 (1991).



Nun Teishin's Tomb

Even now great numbers of people love and respect Ryōkan and are attracted to Teishin, all due to the pure love between them despite a difference of forty years in their ages. She loved Ryōkan, and the two of them sublimated their feelings into a pure realm of Platonic love.

Is it fair to suggest that both Ikkyū (1394-1481) of the Rinzai sect and Ryōkan of the Sōto Zen sect, both of whom were said to be priests of high virtue, could not have attained true enlightenment had it not been for the appearance of a beautiful woman?

(1) This translation is from Katō Kiichi's *Introduction to Ryōkan* (Niigata Nippō Jigyō-sha, 2004), pp. 117-131.

A Chronological Record of Zen Priest Ryōkan

(age counted according to the Japanese way of counting)

A. D. (Japanese Era)	Age	Items
1758 (Hōreki 8)		Ryōkan born. Childhood name is Eizō. Father Inan 23 years old, mother Hideko (or Nobu) 24 years old.
1759 (Hōreki 9)	2	Father Inan inherits the headship of Izumozaki Village.
1770 (Meiwa 7)	13	About this time Ryōkan enters Ōmori Shiyō's Kyōsenjuku.
1775 (Anei 4)	18	Becomes an apprentice of the leader of the village, but soon has his head shaved at Kōshōji Temple, Izumozaki. Practices Zen meditation by doing Zazen.
1779 (Anei 8)	22	Goes to Entsuji Temple, accompanying Priest Kokusen to Tamashima, Okayama Prefecture, and leads an ascetic Zen life.
1783 (Tenmei 3)	26	Mother Hideko dies.
1786 (Tenmei 6)	29	Father Inan retires, and Ryōkan's younger brother Yūshi inherits the leadership of the village. Yūshi 25 years old.
1790 (Kansei 2)	33	Ryōkan receives <i>Inka no Ge</i> (a kind of Graduation Certificate) from Zen Master Kokusen.
1791 (Kansei 3)	34	Priest Kokusen passes away at age 69. After his Master's death, Ryōkan goes on a pilgrimage around Japan as an itinerant priest. His father Inan travels to Kyoto. Master Ōmori Shiyō dies in Tsuruoka, Yamagata Prefecture, age 54.
1795 (Kansei 7)	38	Inan suicides in the Katsura River in Kyoto.
1796 (Kansei 8)	39	Around this time Ryōkan returns to Echigo by way of Hokuikudo (the ancient highway in the Edo era). (Opinion is divided on the year of Ryōkan's return.)
1802 (Kyōwa 2)	45	Lives in the Mitsuzōin of Shōmyōji Temple in Teradomari.
1804 (Bunka 1)	47	Settles down at Gogō-an on Mt. Kugami.
1810 (Bunka 7)	53	Ryōkan's birthplace and the Tachibanaya's household effects are confiscated, and the family is punished with banishment. Ryōkan's house is completely destroyed.
1817 (Bunka 14)	60	Moves from Gogō-an to Otoko Shrine.
1820 (Bunsei 3)	63	At about this time, travels to Yanaizu, Yonezawa, and Tsuruoka as an itinerant priest. Also becomes familiar with Kameda Bōsai, a Confucian scholar in Edo, who happens to visit Echigo Province.
1826 (Bunsei 9)	69	Ryōkan leaves his Otoko Shrine hermitage and moves to the Notoya-Kimura family estate in Wajima Village. Nun Teishin (age 29) meets Ryōkan for the first time. (Some believe she met him the following year.)
1830 (Tenpō 1)	73	In the autumn Ryōkan is infected with dysentery, a disease which has painful symptoms of diarrhea and stomachache.
1831 (Tenpō 2)	74	On January 6, Ryōkan (age 74) passes away after being cared for by Nun Teishin, Yūshi, and Kimura Motoemon.
1833 (Tenpō 4)		Zen Master Ryōkan's tomb is in the graveyard of the Kimura family.
1834 (Tenpō 5)		Brother Yūshi (age 73) dies.
1835 (Tenpō 6)		Nun Teishin completes <i>Hachisu no Tsuyu</i> (<i>Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf</i>), which should be called Ryōkan's first collection of waka.

A Chronological Record of Nun Teishin

(age counted according to the Japanese way of counting)

A. D. (Japanese Era)	Age	Items
1798 (Kansei 10)		Nun Teishin born the second daughter of Okumura Gohei, a samurai of the feudal clan of Nagaoka at Omote-machi, Nagaoka City. (Her childhood name Masu.)
1809 (Bunka 6)	12	Goes to Kashiwazaki accompanied by her childhood nurse.
1814 (Bunka 11)	17	Marries Seki Nagaomi, doctor at Koide-machi, Kitauonuma-gun.
1820 (Bunsei 3)	23	Separates from her husband Nagaomi. Returns to her parents' home. Gets her head shaved at Ennōji Temple. Becomes the disciple of Nun Shinryu and Nun Minryu. She is given the name Teishin-ni.
1826 (Bunsei 9)	29	In March, she moves to the Enmadō in Fukushima, Nagaoka City. In the autumn Ryōkan moves to the Kimura family's estate in Wajima Village after leaving his Otoko Shrine hermitage at the foot of Mt. Kugami. In the autumn Nun Teishin visits Ryōkan at the hermitage of the Kimura family. Teishin meets Ryōkan for the first time on her second visit. (Teishin 29, Ryōkan 69)
1830 (Tenpō 1)	33	Ryōkan and Nun Teishin exchange waka in Yoita where Yūshi, Ryōkan's younger brother, lives. In the autumn Ryōkan is infected with dysentery, a disease which has painful symptoms of diarrhea and stomachache. On December 25, Nun Teishin, Yūshi, and others call on the bedridden Ryōkan at his hermitage of the Kimura family.
1831 (Tenpō 2)	34	On January 6, Ryōkan (age 74) passes away after being cared for by Nun Teishin, Yūshi, and others.
1835 (Tenpō 6)	38	Teishin completes <i>Hachisu no Tsuyu (Dewdrops on a Lotus Leaf)</i> .
1841 (Tenpō 12)	44	Enters Buddhist <u>nunhood</u> . Zen Priest Taizen of Tōunji Temple gives her the authentic ceremony for becoming a nun. Teishin lives in the Shakadō.
1851 (Kaei 4)	54	In April, the Shakadō burns down in the great fire. In September, moves to Fugu-an, built near Shinkōji Temple.
1865 (Keiō 1)	68	From this time on, helps Priest Zōun in Maebashi publish a collection of Ryōkan's poems.
1867 (Keiō 3)	70	<i>Ryōkan Dōjin Ikō (Priest Ryōkan's Posthumous Manuscripts)</i> compiled by Kengen Zōun appears.
1872 (Meiji 5)	75	Nun Teishin passes away.

