

Song of Ryokan from the Morning Liturgy at Ryoko-an

(Daigu Ryokan 1758 – January 6, 1831)

I. Monday

Early, on August the first,
I set out to beg in a city.
Silver clouds sail with me.
Golden winds ring my bells.
At dawn I see the thousand gates and doors thrown open.
At noon I feed my eyes with cool bamboo and basho tree.
East or west, I will not pass a single house unvisited,
Not even the slimy haunts of drunkards and fishmongers.
Straight glances of honest eyes break a pile of swords.
Strides of steady feet scorn the heat of boiling water.
Long ago the Prince of Pure Eating preached how to beg,
And the Beggar of Beggars truly acted out his teaching.
Since then it is two thousand, seven hundred years and more.
Yet am I no less a faithful pupil of the First Teacher.
Therefore I beg, a bowl in my hands, a gown on my back.
Have you not read or heard
Of that noble one of high repute, who solemnly decreed,
Equal in eating, equal under the divine law we must be.
Look out, everyone lest you should run loose unawares.
Who stands secure against the lapse of countless years?

Chinese Poem #8 (10) Page 46 in ZEN POEMS OF RYOKAN, translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa

II. Tuesday

Words come sweeping out of your mouth, when your lips move,
Your arms are slow to act, be you anxious to use them well.
You often try to cover up with your ready-to-flow speeches
What your lazy arms have not quite succeeded in performing.
The harder you try to polish, the more you spoil your work.
The more words you pour out, the greater evils you provoke.
Let us not commit such folly as to flood the fire with oil,
To cool it down for a moment, knowing it will soon explode.

Do not drive after this or that thing in your mad pursuit.
Lock up your lips in deep reticence to do your daily work.

Never fill your mouth till hunger revolts in your stomach,
Nor rattle your teeth until you are fully awake and aware.
Ever since I learned what I know about the life of Hakuyu,
I have some means at least to sustain myself in the world.
Master your breath, so you may be tense with inner spirit.
No ills, then, can break into your heart from the outside.

Chinese poems #103 (202) and #104 (204) Page 72 in Yuasa

III. Wednesday

True, all the seasons have moonlit nights,
But here's the best night to see the moon.
The hills never so aloft, the streams never so clear,
In the infinite blue of autumn sky flies a disk of light.
Neither light nor gloom is graced with a life of its own.
The moon and the earth are one, and myself one with them.
The boundless sky above, and autumn chill on my skin,
I stroll about low hills, leaning upon my priceless cane.
Quiet night has held firm the flitting dust of the world.
The bright moon alone pours streams of rays all about me.
I mind it not if another like-minded is also admiring it,
Or if the moon deigns to look on others as well as on me.
Each year as autumn comes, the moon will shine as before,
And the world will watch it, will face it, till eternity.
Sermons at Mt. Ryozen, lectures in the Vale of Sokei,
Were teachings so precious, the audience needed the moon.
My meditation under the moon lasts till the ripest night.
The stream has hushed its cry, dew lies thick everywhere.
Who, among the moon-viewers tonight, will have the prize?
Who will reflect the purest moon in the lake of his mind?
Surely you all know of that riverside moon-viewing of long ago,
When Fugan alone, the rest lagging, ran beyond the flesh,
And of Yakkyo who, moon-inspired cracked a laugh on a hilltop?
Their reputation rose high, when the feats were reported,
But over a thousand years intervene between now and then.
People have watched for naught the vicissitudes of the moon.
I am, nonetheless, swayed in my thoughts by the ancients.
Tonight, I keep a bright vigil, my robes soaked in tears.

Chinese Poem #51 (84) Page 56 in Yuasa

IV. Thursday

It once grew in the heavenly country far away in the west,
No one knows how many years since its coming to the world.
Its white petals are wrapped in a profusion of shiny dew.
Its rare-green leaves spread everywhere in the round lake.
Chaste is its scent wafted over the fence by a quiet wind.
Arrestingly calm, its whole poise as it rises above water.
The sun has already hid itself behind the hills before me
But I cannot move a step for the charm of the lotus plant.

Now I sing the glory of the bamboo trees around my house.
Several thousands stand together, forming a placid shade.
Young shoots run wild, blocking the roads here and there.
Old branches stretch all the way, cutting across the sky.
Frosty winters have armed them with a spiritual strength.
Rising mists wrap them with the veil of profound mystery.
In their healthy beauty they even rank with pine and oak,
Although they do not vie in grandeur with peach and plum.
Their trunks are upright and their knots are far between.
Their hearts are void of stuffing and their roots sturdy.
Bamboo trees, I admire you for your honesty and strength.
Be my friends, and stand about my retreat until eternity.

Chinese Poems #53 (88) and 54 (89) Page 57 in Yuasa

V. Friday

Ancient sages left their works behind, not to let us know
About themselves, but to help us understand our own stamp.
Had we wisdom deep enough to know ourselves, single-handed,
No benefits would result from the works of ancient saints.
A wise person learns the mystery of existence in a flash
And climbs in a leap beyond the world of hollow phenomena,
Whereas a foolish person holds willfully to facts and details.,
To drown in subtle differences of words and lines,
And being envious of others in their supreme achievements,
Wastes the mind night and day in efforts to exceed,
Truth, if you cleave to it as truth, turns into falsehood.
Falsehood, when you see it as such, becomes at once truth.

Truth and falsehood are the mated edges of a double sword.
None alive can separate with certainty one from the other.
Alas, too many people drift with the skiff to fathom the sea.
From time immemorial they are causes of endless deception.

Sweet saintliness is to be sought as a work of your heart.
The rightful path lies not amid things of constant change.
This plainest truth must be implanted time and time again,
Lest you should fall a witless victim to deceiving voices.
If you turn your shafts northward, hoping to travel south,
Alas, how can you ever arrive at your desired destination?

Chinese poems #98 (181) and 99 (185) Pages 70, 71 in Yuasa

VI. Friday

In its innocence, the heart is like water pure and bright.
Boundless it presents itself to the sight of its beholder.
Should a proud desire rise, however, to disturb its peace,
Millions of wicked thoughts and pictures will bog it down.
If you take these fancies to be real enough to engage you,
You will be led farther and farther away from tranquility.
How sore it is to see a person crazed about earthly thoughts,
A heart bound closely by the cords of the ten temptations.

To hear the words of truth, you must wash your ears clean.
You will not, otherwise, stand true to what you will hear.
You will ask what it is I mean by washing your ears clean.
It means to rid yourself of all you have heard beforehand.
If only one word of your previous learning remains within,
You will fail to embrace the words, when they come to you.
Resembling what you know, a plain lie may seem acceptable,
And a simple truth, strange to your ears, may sound false.
How often, alas, we have our judgments made in our hearts,
When truth lies outside, in a place beyond our conception.
Let us not commit such folly as to steep a stone in water,
To hide it for a moment knowing it will show in due time.

Chinese poem #101 (196) Pages 71, 72 in Yuasa