

仙厓義梵 Sengai Gibon (1750-1837)

Sengai Stories

Translated by Peter Haskel



Portrait of Sengai by his friend Saitō Shūho 齋藤秋圃 (1769-1861)

Property of Shofuku-ji Temple

Among the most beloved and eccentric figures in the history of Japanese Zen is the Rinzai master Sengai Gibon (1750-1837). Like his contemporary the Soto Zen master Ryokan, Sengai was legendary for his warm and unassuming personality, his naiveté, and his close relations with the common people who were his neighbors. Sengai's friends included the Fukoka domain's daimyo, Kuroda Narikiyo, and his samurai retainers, as well as local artists and literati, farmers, drunks, brewers and noodle-makers--the whole gamut of society in Hakata, the town on the northern tip of Kyushu where Sengai's temple, Shofuku-ji, was located. As late as 1930, children in the area all knew stories about "Sengai-san," as he was affectionately referred to, and the people of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's five main islands, commonly spoke of the Master as "Sengai bosatsu" ("Bodhisattva Sengai"). Exceedingly stunted and homely in appearance, always dressed in ragged robes, Sengai was said to have resembled a "mummified monkey", an impression born out in the portrait painted by Sengai's artist friend Saito Shuho. Besides his ready wit and abilities as a Zen master, Sengai, like Ryokan, was celebrated, for his brushwork, especially his playful drawings, which collectors went to inordinate lengths to wheedle out of him.

Born in Mino, now Gifu Prefecture, Sengai entered the temple as a child. Rinzaï Zen in Sengai's period was dominated by two important teaching lines, both centered on the great Kyoto headquarters temple Myoshin-ji: the line of Hakuin Ekaku and that of Hakuin's contemporary, the Zen master Kogetsu Zenzai. Sengai became the disciple of Kogetsu's heir Gessen Zenne (1702-1781), from whom Sengai received inka on passing the koan, "Kyogen's 'Up a Tree.'" When Gessen died, Sengai set off on angya, or Zen pilgrimage, and was eventually asked to assume abbacy of Shofuku-ji, Japan's first Zen temple, established by Myoan Eisai in 1195. Here Sengai spent virtually all his remaining years, reluctant to accept repeated invitation to travel to Kyoto to assume imperial abbacy of Myoshin-ji. As he wrote in one poem:

"The followers of Buddha are extolled in every quarter
The disciples of Confucius are praised throughout the world
I sit on a rock among vines and creepers
Now and then watching the drifting clouds
that pass before my eyes."

Sengai assumed abbacy of Shofuku-ji in 1789, but in 1811 he turned the temple over to his leading disciple, Tangei Toi (d.1855), and retired to a sub-temple, Kyohaku-in. Perhaps tired of the incessant requests for samples of his brushwork, in autumn 1823 Sengai is said to have renounced all further artistic activity, and had the resolution--itself a poem-- carved in stone and set up outside his hermitage:

"Here in Fukuoka in my black robes
I'm putting down my brush for good
Having brought only trouble and shame on myself
As a result of all my scribbling."

In 1837, Tangei committed some infraction for which he was removed by the domainal government from abbacy of Shofuku-ji and sent into exile, forcing Sengai, at age 87, to return and become the temple's abbot once more. Later that year Sengai was able to hand over the abbacy to another disciple and returned to Kyohaku-in, where he passed away several days later. His death verse, for which he seems to have broken his self-imposed ban on poetry and calligraphy, contains a pun in the use of the word "cliff," the second of the characters that make up Sengai's name--"Immortal's Cliff":

"When arriving, know where you came from
When departing, know where you've gone
Without letting go the edge of the cliff
The clouds are too thick to know where you are."

Sengai is the sort of figure about whom legends and folk stories naturally arise, and the following are a selection of such tales from Sengai osho itsuwa sen (Selected Tales of Master Sengai), published in 1998 by Hanazono University's Center for

Research in Zen Culture and based principally on a 1930 collection of Sengai stories, Sengai osho heso (Master Sengai's Belly Button) by Kuramitsu Daigu.

Sengai's Thank-You

The Master had a reputation for never thanking people. One rainy day, on a street not far from the temple, the thong of his geta¹ broke, and observing his distress, the lady at the local tofu shop ran and purchased a new thong and hurried to him with it. The Master, however, did not thank her but just bowed and returned home without a word.

Thereafter, whenever the lady met the Master he still failed to thank her, leaving her filled with indignation.

"What a rude priest!" she thought to herself. And to an acquaintance she complained, "Everyone praises the Master for being such a worthy man, but he isn't anything of the sort. On a rainy day his geta thong broke and he was really in a bad way. But even though I went and bought him a new thong and replaced it for him myself, he never thanked me. I can't imagine a more ungrateful priest!" she fumed.

The woman's acquaintance visited the temple and reported this to the Master.

Sengai said, "When one finishes saying thank you, that's the end of the matter right there. But I intend never to forget a kindness as long as I live."

¹ Japanese platform clogs, often worn in rainy weather.

Sengai and the Fish Bones

Once a day laborer noticed under the main hall of the temple fresh bones from a sea bream. Fish was forbidden in the monastery, and the workman hurried off to the Master with the evidence.

"Master! Master! Look what I found under the monks' hall!" he exclaimed. "How embarrassing to have fish bones turn up here at the temple."

"Well, well," said the Master, "The novices nowadays have certainly gotten soft. Back when I was a novice we never left over even the bones!"

Sengai Dresses for the Occasion

Among Sengai's friends was the noodle-maker Sokyū. He was a warm and generous host, and his home was always filled with guests--actors, sumo wrestlers, doctors, scholars, and priests.

Sokyu greatly revered Sengai, and would regularly bring him the jam dumplings of which the Master was fond, along with the first fruits and vegetables of the season. Being of an open and pure nature, Sokyu was unconcerned with his personal appearance, and even when visiting the master at Kyohaku-in would wear his work clothes.

One day Sokyu arrived at the temple carrying fresh jam buns and wearing work clothes covered in flour.

"Your Reverence," he called out from the entryway, "Are you in?"

Sengai came out and said, "Ah! Sokyu! What's up?"

"I just baked these jam buns," Sokyu replied, "And I wanted to bring them to you while they were warm."

"Indeed!" Sengai said. "Please, wait here just a moment."

And hurrying back inside, the Master changed into his formal priest's robes before reappearing and respectfully receiving the proffered jam buns.

Puzzled, Sokyu stammered, "Your Reverence, I'm very much obliged."

"Not at all," Sengai told him. "After all, you arrived wearing your professional clothes, so the least I could do was put on mine."

Sengai and the Mosquito Net Thief

One summer day two old women from the village came to visit Sengai at the temple.

"My, my!" they exclaimed when Sengai appeared, "What are those red spots all over your face?"

"Oh, those," said the Master. "They're mosquito bites."

"Yes, but why should the mosquitos be biting you so much?" the old ladies asked.

"To tell you the truth," the Master said, "I've already had my mosquito net stolen three times."

"Three times?" the women exclaimed. "You've been robbed three times?"

"That's right," the Master confirmed. "They took all my mosquito nets. What a headache! Every night I pull the bedding over my head for protection, but a mosquito always manages to hide inside and chew me up while I sleep. It itches like crazy!" he told them, grimacing.

The old women both expressed great sympathy for the Master.

"Ladies, if you're willing," Sengai proposed, "I have a plan. Could you make me an all-white mosquito net?"

“Yes, certainly,” the old ladies agreed, and pooling all their rainy-day funds, they made up the white mosquito net just as the Master had requested and brought it to him.

Sengai was overjoyed, and immediately taking out his brushes and ink set to work on the net. He covered its sides with depictions of death’s heads and ghosts and its top with a terrifying picture of the thunder god and lightning goddess. At its corners he painted overturned lanterns and gravestones,, ghastly hands and funerary objects. When he was done he hung up the net and stood back to admire his work. “Well, that should do the trick!” the Master announced with a laugh.

That very night, two thieves snuck up to the temple carrying lanterns. The Master was already sound asleep inside his new mosquito net. He had closed the shoji but left open the shutters.

Sliding aside the shoji, the thieves slipped into the Master’s room. But when they shined the lantern on the mosquito net, they beheld a ghost standing before them. Trembling with fear, but greedy for the net, one of the thieves approached and prepared to cut it from its hanger, when Sengai suddenly began banging his metal wash basin and bellowed, “The god of thunder is here before you!”

Terrified the two fled screaming into the night.

Hearing all the commotion, the temple monks and the nearby villagers came running. When Sengai told them what had occurred, everyone exploded with laughter. When they entered the Master’s room and looked around, they found that the thieves, in their desperation to escape, had dropped a towel, a tobacco pouch, and a pipe.

Out Today

The Master would close his gate, and on it paste a sign that read “Out Today,” meanwhile plainly sauntering back and forth in his front yard.

Once a certain samurai official of his acquaintance passed by, and noticing the Master, went to open the gate and greeted him. “Your Reverence!” he called out, “I haven’t seen you in some time. How have you been?”

In reply Sengai merely pointed to the sign, and told the samurai, “Please read what it says.”

“But your Reverence,” the samurai pleaded, “You’re here, aren’t you? You must just be kidding.”

Sengai dismissed him with a wave of his hand. “That sign,” he reminded the samurai, “says I’m out. It’s true as anything can be.” And he refused any further conversation.

On another occasion, a farmer who was a devoted follower of the Master, came to visit him at the temple carrying a load of Sengai’s favorite sweet potatoes. The Master was indoors wearing a sleeveless jacket and cooking up some rice.

“Hello!” the farmer called out from the gate. “Is your Reverence in?”

“I’m out! I’m out!” Sengai called back from inside.

“You’re out?” the farmer repeated. “But I’ve brought your favorite sweet potatoes...”

No sooner had the Master heard the words “sweet potato” then he flung open the shoji, stuck out his head and shouted, “No, I’m in! I’m in! Just me.”

The Master was known to be immensely fond of sweet potatoes, and people, it’s said, would often use them to lure him out.

The Mischiveous Samurai

From the time the Master became abbot of Shofukuji, he would use any spare time he had from the temple’s affairs to sit down under a tree or on a rock to practice zazen. One night a mischiveous samurai of his acquaintance was passing through a pine grove near the temple when he noticed the Master deep in meditation on a rock under one of the pines, looking just like Bodhidharma.

The next evening when the samurai passed by the spot, there was the Master again, seated in meditation.

“People say that for such a runt of a man, the Master’s got plenty of guts,” the samurai mused. “Well, this looks like a perfect chance to find out!”

The next day at twilight, the samurai went to the pine grove, climbed a pine next to the rock where Sengai did zazen, hid himself, and waited for the Master to appear.

Sengai, with no idea of the trap being laid for him, arrived and plunged into deep samadhi, sitting cross-legged as usual on the rock. No sooner had he begun to meditate, then the samurai, in the tree above, reached down and grabbed the Master’s head. But instead of being alarmed as the samurai had expected, Sengai just went on meditating, still as a stone buddha.

Next, the samurai tried roaring, “I’m going to get you!” But this, too had absolutely no effect. Finally, feeling ashamed, he crept down silently from the tree and went off.

The following morning the samurai went to visit Sengai at the temple. He asked to be conducted to the Master and was promptly shown into the abbot’s private quarters. The instant he stepped through the door the Master shouted from the shadow of a half-opened shoji: “Aha! The ghost!”

“Wha...!” exclaimed the samurai, grabbing for his sword.

The Master nearly split his sides laughing and remarked, “It’s a bad business when one ghost is scaring another!”

The samurai, red in the face, slunk off.

An Executioner’s Guilt

Among the Master’s followers was a man who served the domain’s daimyo, Lord Kuroda, as official executioner.

One snowy day when the man came to visit the temple, Sengai asked him: “You make your living cutting off people’s heads. What about giving up this kind of sinful business?”

“But your Reverence,” the man explained, “His Lordship, the daimyo, can command even my own execution--I’m completely blameless in this.”

The Master did not reply, but changing the subject said, "Right now it's the end of the year, and I have to get the temple grounds cleaned up. I hate to ask, but could you go into the thicket over there and cut down the bamboo?"

"Certainly, your Reverence!" the executioner instantly agreed, and entering the thicket proceeded to cut down the bamboo.

No sooner had he begun, however, than all the snow that had piled up on the bamboos' branches hurtled down with a crash on the executioner's head.

"Oh, it's cold!" he protested, brushing off the snow and returning to the Master's quarters.

Sengai told him, "The snow on the bamboo should have fallen on me, who asked you to do this; but instead it fell on you. Tell me, then: Who is guilty when you cut off someone's head? I want you to consider this carefully."

At these words, the executioner went away.

The Ruffian Samurai

One day when the master was in front of his temple weeding the garden, two samurai appeared.

"Is Master Sengai in?" they demanded.

"He's out," Sengai replied. "None of your lies!" they barked at the Master together. "You're Sengai, aren't you?"

Each samurai then grabbed one of the Master's arms and dragged him inside, where as a crowning indignity they ordered him to produce for them a piece of calligraphy. It was just the same as highway robbery!

The Master, however, remaining perfectly calm, brushed a painting of a copper coin, beside which he inscribed the following haiku:

Two "knights"
dragging away a monk
--It's a hold-up!

Sengai and the Penis Contest

Once when Sengai and the Zen master Don'ei of Sufukuji were invited to the home of an old established Hakata family, they noticed that the alcove was adorned by a magnificent potted orchid. Both of the masters begged to have the plant.

Their host told them, "You both want it? Then we'll have a penis contest, and whoever wins will take the orchid home."

Sengai immediately announced, "They say, 'Small man, big pecker'--so I win!" And triumphantly tucking the orchid under his arm, he went off.

Master Sengai's Disguise

The Master was extremely small, and at first glance might be mistaken for an old lady or a novice priest. He disliked being recognized by people who would exclaim, "That's Master Sengai!" and always looked scruffy and down-at-the-heels.

One day, dressed in a dingy, frayed robe, Sengai was picking tea leaves in the tea garden near his temple when a man came to ask for a piece of the Master's calligraphy.

"Hey, you! Novice!" the man called out. "Where can I find the Venerable Master Sengai's temple?"

Sengai, not in the least put out to be mistaken for a novice, promptly assumed the role and directed the visitor to Kyohaku-in, saying, "Yes, sir, you can find Master Sengai over there."

It's said that several times a day Sengai resorted to such stratagems in dealing with importunate visitors.

Sengai at the Checkpoint

On his way home from Edo, the Master arrived at the checkpoint at Hakone. As he approached, the guard shouted at him, "No nuns allowed to pass this checkpoint!" and refused to let him through.

Laughing, the Master told the guard, "Very well, shall I show you my bona fides?" And pulling up his robes, he said, "Take a look! Male or female?"

Sengai and the Master of Ki

Among the teachers of jujutsu in the Fukuoka domain was one Shobayashi Mata'shichiro. A master of ki power, Shobayashi with a single shout could reportedly knock a man over from behind a screen and bring down a bird in flight by staring at it fiercely.

One day Shobayashi went to visit Master Sengai.

"Your Reverence, why don't we have a little contest," he suggested. "Your samadhi power against my ki power."

"Certainly," Sengai replied. "Feel free to demonstrate your ki power at any time."

Shobayashi chuckled sardonically. "I'm going to really teach you a lesson!" he promised, and went into the next room, where focusing his full force he gave a powerful shout—

"EeeeEEEEEH!"

"I must have knocked that Zen master right on his can!" he gloated. But when he peered into the room he saw Sengai calmly drinking tea. Shobayashi therefore tried again, with a second great shout, but Sengai remained completely unfazed. Even the famous Shobayashi couldn't match the power of Zen meditation.

This reached the ears of the lord of the domain, and consequently Shobayashi's stipend was reduced by fifty *koku*.¹ When Sengai learned of this he was greatly concerned about Shobayashi's situation and secretly summoned him to the temple.¹

¹ A *koku* (approx. 5.2 bushels) is a measure of rice used as an index of wealth and as here to calculate the stipends of samurai

“Let’s have another match,” Sengai suggested. “This time I’ll teach you a surefire way to win.”

The Master then instructed Shobayashi in the meditation technique of counting breaths.

Returning home, Shobayashi practiced the technique single-mindedly night and day, striving to enter the samadhi of breath-counting, till suddenly he became one with his breathing: there was no self apart from his breath, no breath apart from his self. He shouted, and the force of his shout filled heaven and earth. It seemed as if at that moment nothing existed in the vast universe. At the same time, when he shouted, the entire universe suddenly appeared.

“That’s it!” he cried out spontaneously and rushed off to see Sengai, presenting his realization.

Astonished, Sengai exclaimed, “Shobayashi, you’ve done it! That shout is Rinzai’s ‘jeweled sword of the Vajra King.’ You’ve knocked down not only me but heaven and earth and all there is. I’ve lost the match!”

Through his practice of breath-counting meditation, Shobayashi realized the indestructible diamond samadhi. Thereafter, not only was the fifty koku restored to Shobayashi’s stipend, but an *additional* fifty, it is said, was awarded him.

Sengai and the Wall Scribbler

Someone once came and left a drawing of a penis on the gate of Sengai’s temple. Sengai erased it, but the next morning an even larger penis had been drawn on the gate. Again Sengai rubbed it out, but in the morning a still larger penis had been drawn. Alongside appeared the inscription: “Touch it and it gets bigger.”

“Ah,” the Master exclaimed, “This time I’ve been beaten!”

Sengai and the Sword Master

In Hakata there lived a teacher of swordsmanship who had formerly been a retainer of the daimyo of Fukuoka but had become a ronin, or masterless samurai, and sent his son to become a monk under Master Sengai. Later when the sword master had once again found employment with a lord, he petitioned Sengai to allow his son to return to lay life and become the family heir. Sengai agreed, and the young man returned home, where under his father’s instruction he devoted himself to the practice of swordsmanship.

One day the son returned to visit Sengai.

“You’ve been at it for some time now,” the Master observed. “Have you gotten your swordsman’s credentials?”

“Not yet,” the young man admitted, “I’m still not qualified.”

Sengai then wrote something and handed it to him, saying, “Take this back with you and show it to your father.”

Returning home he did as Sengai instructed.

When his father received the document he was startled to read: “Between the Way of Zen and the Way of the sword there is only a difference of words, and this is itself the essence of

the teaching of swordsmanship in our school. My son has studied the Way of Zen under your Reverence, so that there remain no further problems.”

The sword master promptly conferred on his son successorship in the school’s innermost teachings.

Master Sengai Arrives at the Temple

The monks of Shofukuji had assembled on the outskirts of Hakata to greet their new abbot. But they waited and waited, and still no one resembling an eminent priest appeared. Tired of waiting, they noticed a stunted, bedraggled beggar priest pass along the main road in the twilight and called out to him, “Hey! On the boat here did you happen to meet the eminent priest called Master Sengai?”

Pausing, the beggar monk remained silent and then quietly replied, “Sengai....Yes, that’s me.”

The monks, taken aback, kept staring at the beggar monk. “This is Sengai?” they all wondered.

The Master, accompanied by the monks, proceeded to his new temple. On the way, the monks stopped at a tea stall, and Sengai joined them all for buckwheat noodles in broth. When they had finished eating and were about to leave, one of the monks complained, “Those noodles we just had were made with fish stock. And Master Sengai himself partook of such food.” Many of the other monks could be heard muttering their disapproval as well.

Sengai told them, “I don’t know anything about fish myself, but the soup tasted delicious, so I ate it. I can assume you all must be used to eating fish, and that’s why you’re so familiar with the taste.”

The monks all looked away shamefaced.

Master Sengai Inscribes a Painting

One day a samurai named Genyu came to the temple. Demanding that the Master paint something for him, he refused to budge till Sengai complied. Having no choice, the Master took a clean sheet of paper on which he painted two circles before handing it to the samurai.

Genyu examined the painting, but unable to make out what it meant asked the Master to inscribe it with a title.

Sengai promptly took his brush and wrote: “Genyu’s balls.”

Red with embarrassment the samurai took the painting and fled.

Sengai and the Delinquent Monk

There were many monks training at Shofukuji under Master Sengai. Not far from the temple was a red light district that attracted many monks, who at night would scale the monastery wall to secretly visit the brothels. Because the wall was quite high, the monks would leave under it a footstool to help them get over and back down again on their return. Among the miscreants was Sengai’s favorite disciple, Tangen, whose participation in these outings was something that the Master could not avoid learning of.

One evening at the hour he knew the monks would be returning from their foray into the gay quarter, Sengai stationed himself under the wall, removing the step stool and sitting down to practice zazen and await the monks' return. Toward dawn, the unsuspecting monks tiptoed back to the temple and climbed the wall. But as they lowered themselves down on the other side, they were disconcerted to find that the footstool they always left behind was missing. Their feet groped in confusion in the darkness for the stool. Finally they managed to find something in its place that allowed them to lower themselves from the wall, and placing their feet on it, one by one they stepped down into the temple yard. As they peered around in the shadows, they were astonished to discover that the object they had used as a footstool was the shaved head of their teacher! White with fear, they prostrated themselves on the ground. But Master Sengai, in admonishing them, blamed only himself, saying their misbehavior was due to his own negligence in teaching.

Sengai and the Merchant's Dilemma

One year, the Hakata area was in the grip of a cholera epidemic. The head of the merchant house of Happyaku-ya, who was a frequent visitor to Sengai's temple, arrived looking severely distraught and told the Master, "Your Reverence, this year, expecting big demand for squash, I bought up a huge quantity. But now people are saying that eating squash will give you cholera, and as a result no one is buying. If I don't sell the squash my family is ruined. Please, you've got to help me!"

"That's really terrible," Sengai commiserated. "Very well, I'll become your business manager and sell them for you. Please bring me all your squash."

The merchant wondered what Sengai had in mind, but he dutifully loaded all the squash onto a cart and brought them to the temple. Sengai then piled all the vegetables in front of Shofukuji's main gate with a big sign that read, "Magical Cholera-Prevention Squash," and spreading his meditation mat alongside, sat down and practiced zazen.

Immediately word spread throughout the area, and before long the whole district was flocking to buy the squash. By noon the squash had all sold out, and the fortunes of the firm of Happyaku-ya were restored.

The Disputatious Monk

On New Year's Day Sengai was roasting holiday rice cakes over the fire when a monk came to visit. Seating himself before the brazier directly in front of the Master, the monk proceeded to put forward various petty theories, challenging Sengai to engage in a Zen dialogue.

The Master remained silent and simply listened. Suddenly he grabbed the tongs, and seizing the hot rice cake he'd been roasting over the flame hurled it smack against the cheek of the astonished monk, shouting "You're a great talker. Try chewing on this!"

"Hot! Hot! Hot!" the monk howled in pain.

"There's no need to make such a fuss," Sengai reproved him. "Something hot is going to be hot."

Master Sengai's Heaven and Hell

When a Shinto priest visited the master at Kyohaku-in, the discussion turned to heaven and hell.

"Your Reverence," the Shinto priest asked, "Where is heaven to be found?"

“On the Plane of High Heaven¹ to which you pray every day,” Sengai replied.

¹Takama ga hara, the homeland of the gods in Japanese creation myths.

“Then how about hell?” the priest demanded.

“The Plane of High Heaven’s next-door neighbor.”

On another occasion a monk from Buzen asked the Master, “What about heaven?”

Sengai promptly lay down as if going to sleep.

“And what about hell?” the monk persisted.

Sengai closed his eyes and began to snore loudly.

“I’ve come all this way to question him on the Dharma, and he has the rudeness to just fall asleep!” the monk grumbled, and glaring at the Master started out of the room.

At that moment Sengai sat up abruptly, and pointing at the monk, remarked, “That is hell.”

Master Sengai Receives an Official

The Master was extremely relaxed and informal. When a senior samurai official of the domain came to call on him at Kyohaku-in, the Master had just stepped into the bath, but hearing that the official had arrived, jumped right out and searched around for a robe.

The official, who was waiting in the next room, called out, “Please don’t trouble yourself, your Reverence. As you are is just fine.”

“Well, then, if you’ll excuse me...” Sengai announced, and entered the room stark naked, to the amazement of the senior official.

Getting Old

There was a sarcastic fellow named Choeimon who was a favorite of the Master and could provoke a fight with only two or three words. One day he came to Sengai and complained, “Your Reverence, I don’t want to put on any more years.”

“What’s that?” said Sengai. “While you’re alive it’s all the same year.”

Sengai and the Sweet Potatoes

Sengai was extremely fond of sweet potatoes. Knowing this, the local people, when they wished to obtain pieces of the Master’s calligraphy, would buy a quantity of sweet potatoes and bring them along when they visited Sengai, deliberately placing the potatoes where he could see them.

“Your Reverence, please paint something for me,” the person in search of calligraphy would ask.

“Forget that for now--where are you taking those sweet potatoes?” Sengai would demand.

“I’m bringing them someplace else,” the local would reply.

“Turn them over to me and I’ll paint something for you,” Sengai would say.

“Very well,” the man would agree, “If you paint something for me, they’re all yours.”

Using this sort of strategy, it is said, people would regularly wheedle paintings out of the Master.

Master Sengai’s Meal for Two

Once when Sengai had been out sightseeing, he became hungry on his way home and approached a tea shop.

“Excuse me,” he called out, “But I’ve got a young novice with me and he says he’s so hungry he just can’t walk any more. Can you serve us some food?”

The tea shop owner brought out portions for two people, and Sengai contentedly polished both portions off.

Suspicious, the tea shop owner asked, “What about your novice?”

“Oh...well...” Sengai sputtered, and rapped himself sharply twice on the head.

Sengai’s Nap

One summer day, a certain sword master from Fukuoka named Toda arrived at the temple to visit Sengai. He found the Master stark naked and napping on his back. Suddenly grabbing Sengai by the testicles, Toda shouted, “What is this?”

Sengai, totally unperturbed, without even opening his eyes, replied, “A wasted possession,” and then resumed snoring loudly.

ZEN NOTES, 2003