

# Ikkyū Sōjun

There is a sense in which the Japanese Zen monk Ikkyū Sōjun (一休宗純; 1394–1481) never really died. Not only does his poetry survive, but his legend has constantly adapted itself to changing times and is still very much alive today. His most recent incarnation as a quick-witted, cheeky little boy, now in the form of *manga* and *anime*, emerges from a series of stories that were developed around his persona during the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), which in turn emerged from a life dedicated to a nice contradiction: while fighting a constant battle against pretence and sham on the one hand, he was busy creating an archetypal image of the Zen monk in action on the other.

The main biographical sources for Ikkyū are the collection of his poetry in Chinese, *Kyōunshū* (Crazy Cloud Anthology; 狂雲集, text NST, vol. XVI; trans. Arntzen, 1986), which includes many poems of an autobiographical nature, and the hagiographic *Tōkai Ikkyū Oshō nenpu* (Chronicle of Abbot Tōkai Ikkyū; 東海一休和尚年譜) written by the painter Bokusai (墨齋; 1412?–1491), a man who knew him well and who produced the realistic sketch of his master now held in the Tokyo National Museum, one of the most famous portraits in Japan (Fig. 1; Brinker & Kanazawa, 1996, 262–263). The fact that 20 other portraits of Ikkyū are still extant speaks to his contemporary fame. Three of these have colophons written by Ming literati, and it is thought that they must have been taken to China and back to Japan by one of Ikkyū's patrons, the Sakai (境) merchant Owa Sōrin (尾和宗臨), soon after Ikkyū's death (*Ikkyū: tonchikozō no shōtai*, 2015, 146–147).

Bokusai's *Chronicle* is a complex mixture of fact and legend. The suggestion is made that Ikkyū was in fact the unacknowledged offspring of the sovereign Go-Komatsu (後小松; 1377–1433), and Ikkyū himself seems to have believed this. He was sent to work in a temple, the Ankokuji (安國寺), at the young age of five and showed early promise. In 1410 he chose to study under a monk called Ken'ō Sōi (謙翁宗爲; d. 1414), who was known for his uncompromising attitude to meditation and monastic life. When Ken'ō died in 1414, Ikkyū moved on to train with another demanding master Kasō Sōdon (華叟

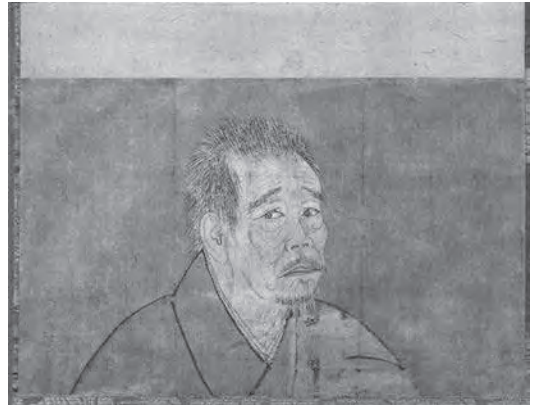


Fig. 1: The Zen priest Ikkyū Sōjun by Bokusai (墨齋); © Tokyo National Museum; image: TNM Image Archives.

宗叟; 1352–1428), who lived and worked in a small temple at Katada (堅田), on the western shores of Lake Biwa. Kasō's allegiance was to the Daitokuji (大徳寺) lineage. This Zen temple had been established in Kyoto for the monk Daitō (大燈; 1282–1337) by Emperor Go-Daigo (後醍醐; 1288–1339) and so was not in favor with the Ashikaga (足利) shogunate; in fact, by the end of the 14th century it was no longer considered part of the official *gozan* (五山, Five Mountains) system of government-sponsored monasteries at all, and had been demoted in rank. This suggests that from the very beginning Ikkyū showed no interest in joining the Buddhist establishment.

In 1432 we find Ikkyū has moved to the prosperous trading port of Sakai. It was here, we are told, he threw off the shackles of strict monasticism and moved onto the streets, taking his message straight into the drinking establishments and brothels along the waterfront, not as a killjoy but as an active participant. This was to be Zen in action: an attempt to live according to the difficult and often misunderstood belief that *nirvāṇa* was *saṃsāra* and that all distinctions were ultimately untenable. His blunt refusal to accept the pretensions of the Zen hierarchy and his willingness to break the precepts endeared him to the merchants in the town. Whether they actually treated him as a cross between a madman and a jester or took his message to heart, we shall never

know, but contacts made at this time stood him in good stead later on when, somewhat to everyone's surprise, he was called upon to help rebuild Daitokuji itself.

It would appear that during this period he was forever shifting between Kyoto and Sakai, sometimes just to avoid getting caught up in the fighting and banditry that was a constant threat in these anarchic times. In 1440 a fellow student of Kasō, Yōsō Sōi (養叟宗頤; 1379–1458) who became the 26th abbot of Daitokuji, invited him to take charge of the sub-temple Nyo'i'an (如意庵), but after only ten days Ikkyū left in high dudgeon, disgusted with the mixture of complaisance and corruption he found there, while also owning up to a general dislike of monastic life:

Ten days in this temple and my mind's a mess,  
Trails of lust still dragging at my feet.  
If someday you should come and ask for me  
Try the fishmonger, tavern or brothel  
(NST, vol. XVI, 299; author's trans.).

A long-running battle between Ikkyū and Yōsō ensued, which culminated in 1454; Ikkyū commemorated the final break with a collection of vitriolic essays and poetry entitled *Jikaishū* (自戒集, Poems of self-admonition), in which he accused Yōsō of a whole series of corrupt practices such as selling certificates of enlightenment (*inka* [印可]) for profit. It was during this time that Ikkyū also became closely involved with a number of the major cultural figures of his day: the Nō playwright Konparu Zenchiku (金春禪竹; 1405–1468?), the *renga* poet Iio Sōgi (飯尾宗祇; 1421–1502), and the tea master Murata Shukō (村田珠光; 1422–1502). He himself became known for his calligraphy, which was in great demand as the backdrop for tea ceremonies and which gave rise to a vast number of fake copies emerging during the subsequent Tokugawa period. There remains, nevertheless, a large number of genuine examples in collections in Japan and abroad (for details see *Ikkyū: tonchikozō no shōtai*, 2015). One of them, dated 1453 and now in the Hatakeyama Kinenkan (畠山記念館) in Tokyo, is a requiem for a pet sparrow that had suddenly died and to which he gave the sobriquet "Sonrin" (尊林) (Brinker & Kanazawa, 1996, 189).

In 1456 he undertook to restore a small temple called Myōshōji (妙勝寺) at Takigimura (薪村), and built for himself a hermitage called the Shūon'an (酬恩庵). In 1464 the owner of a rare portrait of the

Chinese master Xutang Zhiyu (虛堂智愚, Jpn. Kidō Chigu; 1189–1269) decided it should be given to the Shūon'an, and that same night the abbot and other monks had a dream in which they saw Ikkyū arriving; from that time on Ikkyū was considered to be the incarnation of Xutang, and there exist a number of portraits showing him in the guise of this Chinese Chan master. Then in 1470, in his 77th year, Ikkyū again broke with convention, falling in love with a 40-year-old blind singer called Shin (森) and, possibly, fathering a child. Four years later in 1474, he was himself invited to become abbot of Daitokuji, then in ruins. Partly thanks to the generosity of his merchant friends in Sakai, he was able to start rebuilding the compound just before he died at the age of 88 in 1481.

Bokusai's hagiography contains many episodes designed to illustrate Ikkyū's eccentricities and to mark his uniqueness. He was, of course, described as a young genius, with little time for received etiquette. At one point he thought of drowning himself. He achieved awakening at a very early age but refused the certificate offered by his master, and when offered it again later tore it into pieces. He cleaned up his master's diarrhoea with his own bare hands. In Sakai he is said to have carried around a wooden sword inside a splendid scabbard to illustrate the hollow uselessness of conventional monastic Zen, an episode that clarifies the iconography of a number of portraits in which he is depicted sitting with a sword leaning by his chair. Time and again he was impatient, rude, and railed against what he saw as corruption in the Zen institutions, all the while indulging himself from time to time in drink and sex. He is portrayed as being convinced it was preferable to be frank and open about the demands of the flesh rather than break the precepts in secret and live a lie. He was utterly certain that his view of Zen was the genuine one and that convention was the enemy of truth. In turn it appears that he himself was indulged and much loved.

Much of this iconoclasm is reflected in the Chinese poetry (*kanshi* [漢詩]) that he composed throughout his life and that was collected in the *Kyōunshū*. This poetry is erudite, studded with allusions to Chinese history and Zen lore, and often intentionally ambiguous; were it not that it provides rare material for the would-be biographer it might not have been so well studied as it is. What it gives us is color, for here we have the man himself criticizing others, being at times shockingly

blunt, and giving expression to a strong antinomian impulse. There are poems in which he vents his spleen against the “leper” Yōsō, and poems that illustrate Buddhist truths, but most famous of all are those in which he reveals his own weaknesses and the realities of the human condition.

Ten years in brothels unable to exhaust desire  
Drove me to occupy these empty mountains and  
valleys deep;  
Now, cut off by clouds from pleasures a world  
away,  
Still it grates upon the ear, this wind in the pines  
above my head  
(NST, vol. XVI, 300; author's trans.).

A love poem:

Night after night blind Shin sings to me  
Under the covers two mandarin ducks whisper  
sweet nothings again  
Renewing the vow to meet at Maitreya's coming,  
Here lies the old Buddha and all is spring  
(NST, vol. XVI, 362; author's trans.).

In a poem entitled “On a picture of an *arhat* entering a brothel,” Ikkyū refers to the story that Mañjuśrī recited passages from the *Śūraṅgamasamādhi-sūtra* in order to save Ānanda from being bewitched by a courtesan:

Having left the world behind, this arhat was still  
far from Buddha land,  
But one visit to a brothel brought him true  
awakening;  
How stupid, Mañjuśrī with his *Śūraṅgama* spells  
Casting aside all the pleasures of youth  
(NST, vol. XVI, 344; author's trans.).

To be set against the extreme difficulty of his Zen poetry is a group of far more approachable prose works such as *Mizukagami* (水鏡, Like water, like mirror), *Ninin bikuni* (二人比丘尼, Two Nuns;), *Gaikotsu* (骸骨, Skeletons, 1457), and *Amida hadaka monogatari* (あみだはだか物語, Amida Revealed) (texts Iizuka, 1997–2010, vol. IV; trans. Sanford, 1981). These can be categorized as early examples of what is known as *kana hōgo* (假名法語), short exemplary stories and essays written in the vernacular that explain the general outlines of Zen Buddhist doctrine. It is here that we encounter the man at home on the street, intent on teaching the down-and-out and the dispossessed. While it is not at all certain that these were indeed written by Ikkyū, the attribution secured their survival and popularity.

Not surprisingly, when mass printing took off in the early Tokugawa period these stories became part of the staple diet and were constantly rewritten and reprinted. It is in tandem with these that we begin to find the emergence of stories about Ikkyū himself, beginning with the collection *Ikkyū-banashi* (一休ばなし, Tales of Ikkyū, 1668) (SNKBZ, vol. LXII), which contains a group of iconic tales designed in the form of a fictional biography. Four years later came *Ikkyū shokoku monogatari* (一休諸國物語, Ikkyū in the Provinces) (Asakura, 1982), which included many stories that had nothing to do with Ikkyū, but into which he was now placed as the protagonist. A flood of sequels was to follow: from *Ikkyū kashōki* (一休可笑記, Ikkyū: Comic Tales, 1706) (base1.nijl.ac.jp/iview) and *Zoku Ikkyū-banashi* (續一休咄, More Tales of Ikkyū, 1731) (Yarai, 1731) to *Ikkyū shokoku monogatari zue* (一休諸國物語圖會, More Tales of Ikkyū, Illustrated, 1836) (Emi, 1903) and *Ikkyū shokoku monogatari zue shūi* (一休諸國物語圖會拾遺, Yet More Tales of Ikkyū, Illustrated, 1844) (www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki), the last two being mainly compendia of the earlier publications (Oka, 1995, 107). In this sense, Ikkyū became part of the growing commercialization of printing and satisfied a demand for stories that revealed in a combination of iconoclasm and wit. The eccentric monk who wrote difficult poetry had transmogrified into a folk hero who could amuse, entertain, and enlighten in equal measure. At the New Year he was reputed to carry with him a skull on the end of a pole, ostensibly to congratulate everyone he met but actually to warn them of the illusions to which they were prey, using a trick that works via word-play: the Japanese for “congratulations,” *medetai* (目出た), can also be construed as meaning “eyes popped out.” Asked to conduct a funeral service for a favorite cat, he chants: “when you were alive you caught many mice and thanks to that you were cherished and lived a peaceful life. Whatever you become in the next life, be sure to catch a Buddha. Ha!” (Yarai, 1731, vol. IV, 4v). The following is perhaps the best-known episode of Ikkyū as a youth, repeated in various forms almost ad infinitum:

They say that from childhood Ikkyū was different from others – exceptionally clever and bright. His master was a monk called Yōsō. An intelligent supporter of the temple came quite often to study Zen with Yōsō and, attracted by Ikkyū's quickness of mind, would exchange banter with him. On

one occasion, he turned up wearing leather leggings. Ikkyū saw him coming, ran into the temple and scribbled on a board: "It is strictly forbidden to bring leather goods into the temple grounds. Violators will be punished." When the man saw the notice, he said: "If there's a punishment for bringing in leather goods, what do you do about that big drum?" "Well," said Ikkyū, "that's why three times every day and every night we give it a good beating. Since you're wearing leather, perhaps we should give you a beating too!"

Sometime later the man invited Yōsō for a meal and asked that Ikkyū accompany them, intending to pay him back for his cheek. He placed a notice at the foot of the bridge that led to his entrance on which was written: "It is strictly forbidden to cross this *hashi* ('bridge' but also meaning 'edge'). Yōsō ordered Ikkyū to come with him to the meal but on reaching the house, he saw the notice and said: 'But we can't get in without crossing this *hashi*. What shall we do?' 'Well,' said Ikkyū, 'it's written phonetically (in *kana*, and therefore ambiguous), so we can just walk over the [middle of the] bridge'" (SNKBZ, vol. LXII, 231–232).

The popularity of the trickster figure of Ikkyū received further impetus with the arrival in the 1670s of Lady Hell (Jigoku Dayū [地獄大夫]), a Sakai "courtesan" who, realizing her present fate was the result of an unfortunate past, was said to have renamed herself and paraded around the city dressed in clothes embroidered with illustrations of various hells. And who had chanced to meet her and exchange poems of mutual understanding but Ikkyū. This gave birth to a play and a "biography" by the author Santō Kyōden (山東京田, 1761–1816), the illustrations to which linked Lady Hell with Ikkyū and his habit of brandishing skulls. Stories of this type were not only published in the Meiji period but actually increased in popularity. Ikkyū appeared as a character in *kōdanbon* (講談本), storyteller's scripts that were all the rage in the 1890s, and his biography became more and more complex. Attention shifted to his birth: no, he was not the son of Go-Komatsu but of Go-Kameyama (後亀山; c. 1347–1424) of the Southern Court. He had been born prematurely. The reason he had entered a temple at an early age was because his mother hoped he might eventually revive the fortunes of the Southern Court, and so on. Yet again we find the Ikkyū legend responding to current concerns; in this case contemporary discussions of the awkward period in Japan's history when two courts vied for legitimacy.

There is yet one further twist to the story. During the late Meiji period, there were one or two illustrations that presented Ikkyū exclusively as a small boy, but the little figure with a shaved head whom we know today as "Ikkyū-san" was not born until the 1930s, when the publisher Kōdansha began to issue children's Ikkyū picture books (Oka, 1995, 161–163). After the end of the Pacific War this then developed into a *manga* series devoted to amuse and educate the very young. The first *anime* arrived in 1975 and set light to another "Ikkyū boom" that lasted some ten years, and he was appearing in Taiwanese *manga* as Yixiu Heshang (一休和尚) as late as the 1990s (*Ikkyū: tonchikozō no shōtai*, 2015, 99). Few historical figures have had the fortune (or is it perhaps a misfortune?) to be incarnated so many times as Ikkyū, all the way from a 15th-century iconoclastic Zen monk to a 20th-century naughty but clever child.

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