An Eccentric Monk of the Muromachi Era

Ikkyū Sōjun (1394–1481) was one of the most famous Zen monks in Muromachi-era Japan (1333–1573) because of his unconventional and eccentric behavior (not by chance he often called himself Kyōun, the “Crazy Cloud”), his unorthodox views, and his artistic abilities. His reputation as a popular hero of amusing stories has long been preserved, and his life story has been enriched by legends and anecdotes that are well-known among Japanese children today. We will examine Ikkyū’s role as an original thinker and a versatile poet who left a collection of poems in Chinese writing or kanbun, the Kyōun-shū (An Anthology of the Crazy Cloud), many of which deal with traditional Zen kōans in innovative and creative ways.

Writing poetry in Chinese was a common practice for many Japanese monks, who left an enormous legacy known as gozan bungaku or the “literature of the Five Mountains” of medieval Zen monasticism. But Ikkyū’s poetry contrasts strikingly with the typically formal works of gozan poets, who sought to pursue Chinese standards of secular poetry rather than to promote religious values. As a result, gozan poetry was often fossilized and artificial. In Ikkyū’s poems, however, we find a somewhat clumsy and less refined, but at the same time a much more sincere and individualistic manner of writing. Robust and sometimes shocking revelations make Ikkyū’s collection at once more attractive and more embarrassing than most of the works of his contemporaries. In particular, the treatment of traditional Buddhist subjects in the poems is original, highly personal, and paradoxical.  

Hardly anyone before or after Ikkyū used poetry to such an extent as an expression of the most intimate feelings, spiritual turmoil, or reflections on the meaning of life. His poems are not purely didactic considerations or admonitions, though in part they were written exactly for that purpose, as is apparent from some of the titles. Rather they are eloquent disclosures of his never-ending search for the Absolute, without any hope of finding a final solution,
and they have no peer among gozan poetry. The poems are permeated with despair and anger, accusations against the vices of fellow monks and other countrymen, and nostalgic praise for the blessed, golden age of former Chinese or Japanese Zen masters. The Kyōun-shū as a whole may be labeled a "poetic confession of faith" or a "picaresque autobiography." It abounds in deep reflections on Zen philosophical principles and memorable events from the history of the sect, as well as self-criticism and even overtly erotic verses.

However, grasping the meaning of Ikkyū's poetry, composed in verses of four lines with a total of twenty-eight Sino-Japanese characters, sometimes seems quite difficult or nearly impossible because of the repeated use of the same characters with various meanings, as well as hidden allusions or uncommon expressions which seem to reflect an absence of any direct, logical connection between each of the four lines. Scholars and translators frequently argue about the intention and exact meaning of his poems and try to trace and dismantle possible sources by browsing through standard Zen writings or the verses of classical Chinese poets. However, even if certain lines are convincingly proved as intentional borrowings, the whole meaning may still remain elusive. Therefore only an exhaustive reading of famous Ch'án/Zen writings can provide a clue to the meaning of Ikkyū's poetry. These works include the Lin-chi lu (J. Rinzai roku), Ching-te ch'üan-teng lu (J. Keitoku dentōroku), Wu-teng hui-yüan (J. Gotō egen), and kōan collections such as the Wu-men kuan (J. Mumonkan) and Pí-yen lu (J. Hekiganroku), as well as the "recorded sayings" (C. yü-lu, J. goroku) of Hsü-t'ang (Ikkyū proclaimed himself the incarnation of Hsü-t'ang in Japan) or of Daiō or Daitō, the founders of the Daitoku-ju branch of the Rinzai sect to which Ikkyū belonged.

It is impossible in one short chapter to delineate even in a cursory manner all the possible ways that kōans were used in Ikkyū's poetry. I will provide only a few examples that show Ikkyū's attitude toward kōan practice, in addition to some cases for which allusions to certain traditional cases turn the poems themselves into kōans.

Persistent Gratitude toward Yün-men and Kōan Collections

Ikkyū attained his first satori or Zen awakening in 1418. At this time, he was reflecting on a kōan dealing with the 60 blows that Tung-shan was said to have promised Yün-men. Nevertheless, Ikkyū's satori apparently occurred when he heard a blind musician chanting a story from the Heike monogatari about Gio, a concubine of the powerful Taira Kiyomori; she lost his love and in distress became a nun. The extant sources do not reveal any connection between the Gio story, the aforementioned kōan, and Ikkyū's satori. Because Yün-men (864–949) was implicitly responsible for his first satori, throughout his life Ikkyū felt much indebted to the Chinese master and often included overt and
covert allusions to him in his poems. For example, in the poem “Waves of Peach Blossoms” (no. 35 in the Kyōun-shū) Ikkyū wrote:

Along the waves, together with the combers—a lot of red dust.
I see again the peach blossoms—in spring of the third moon.
Resentment flows by for three lives and sixty kalpas.
Annually, dry gills and scales lay under the sun by the Dragon Gates.

The main images in this poetic kōan can be traced to popular Chinese concepts connected with seasonal changes. The phrase “waves of peach blossoms” indicates the third month, when falling peach petals cover the river water. According to Chinese beliefs, exactly at that time carps gather before the rapids known as the Dragon Gates, trying to jump over in order to change into dragons. The overcoming of the Dragon Gate in the Zen tradition became associated with “passing through a barrier,” or the attainment of satori. Ikkyū also includes in his poem a quotation from Yün-men’s “turning phrase,” “Along the waves, together with the combers.”

The poem pivots on the kōan from the Pi-yen lu (case 60) that deals with Yün-men, who raised his staff and announced that it was a dragon that would swallow heaven and earth. Later on Yün-men added, “Where will you be able to find mountains, rivers, and the great earth?” The kōan is followed by a verse:

This staff swallows Heaven and Earth,
Vain will be the chattering about “waves of peach blossoms.”
The parch-tailed ones will not grasp clouds and mists,
For what purpose did those with dried gills lose their life and soul?\(^3\)

A poem (no. 47) under the title “The Hundredth Anniversary of Daitō Kokushi’s Death” evidently hints at a verse in case 24 in the Pi-yen lu:

Many of Buddha’s descendants passed through the Main Gates.
I alone am wandering among rivers and seas.
Where will the next Communal Feast Festival be held?
White clouds cook rice on the top of Wu-t’ai-shan mountain.

The case story is about the nun Liu Te-mo, who visited Kuei-shan Lin-yu and was greeted with a belittling question, “Is it you, old cow, who came to me?” (One has to keep in mind that Kuei-shan called himself “a water buffalo.”) Mo answered, “Tomorrow will be the Communal Feast Festival (C. ta-hui-chai, J. taiesai) on Mount Wu-t’ai, and the teacher has just left that place.” Kuei-shan lay down and fell asleep. Mo immediately left.\(^4\) Since the Six Dynasties period Mount Wu-t’ai had been a popular pilgrimage site where official cerc-
monies beseeching for prosperity for the country were held annually. The last line of the verse alludes to a poem by Tung-shan preserved in the Ku-ts’un-su yü-lu (J. Kosonshoku goroku):

Clouds cook rice on the top of Mount Wu-t’ai-shan.
A dog urinates before the steps of the Buddha Hall.
A banner-pole is used for frying rice flat-cakes.
Three monkeys bolt daybreak through a sieve.

The first two lines in Tung-shan’s poem are borrowed, in turn, from case 96 of the Pi-yen lu: 

“Clouds on Mount Wu-t’ai-shan cook rice; a dog pises to the sky before the old Buddha hall.”

Another poem in the Kyoun-shu (no. 45) is an illustration of case no. 83 in the Pi-yen lu: “While Yün-men was addressing monks he asked, ‘An old Buddha and a naked pole are communicating. What is the meaning of it?’ He himself gave the answer, ‘Clouds rise on the Southern Peak; it rains on the Northern Mountain.’” The verse reads:

How can the “Small Bride” marry P’eng-lai?
The “cloud-rain” this evening is like in a previous dream.
In the morning he is on T’ien-t’ai, and in the evening on Nan-yüeh.
I wonder, where could I find Shao-yang?

The “Small Bride” is a tiny island in the Yangtze River in Chiang-hsi province, and P’eng-lai (initially a mythic island where Taoist immortals abide) is also the name for a rock at the same place on the opposite bank. In the popular imagination the island and the rock were believed to be spouses. The second line contains complex allusive associations. The kōan pivots on the interrelation of two incompatible phenomena. As an answer to an illogical question Yün-men used an equally absurd phrase. Ikkyū further plays on images implying a love affair and shifts the content of the kōan into the sexual sphere. The word sōkō (“to communicate”) in Yün-men’s question also has the meaning “to copulate,” while in the Chinese tradition the “cloud-rain” is a standard metaphor for a love-union, a phrase often exploited by Ikkyū in his poetry.

The third line contains the names of two sacred mountains in Chinese Buddhism, T’ien-t’ai and Nan-yüeh. It reverses the poetic flow from sexual associations back into a religious context. The former mountain was the abode of Chih-yi, the patriarch of the T’ien-t’ai school, while the latter was a dwelling place of his teacher Hui-ssu. As a result, the mountains are separated by a small geographical distance yet preserve a spiritual affinity between master and disciple. Modern interpreter Hirano Sōjō suggests that the line alludes to a story in the Hsü-t’ang lu: “A monk was asked, ‘What is your strategy, if you cannot say anything?’” The monk responded, ‘If I am not on T’ien-t’ai moun-
tain, I am on Nan-yüeh mountain.' 

8 Also, Shao-yang was another name of Yün-men, the main character of the kōan that Ikkyū used as the subject for this poem.

Another poem (no. 51) has as an introduction a kōan story that was borrowed from case no. 82 in the Ts'ung jüng lu (J. Shōyōroku) collection and that deals with the merciful bodhisattva Kuan-yin (J. Kannon) in one of her 33 manifestations: "Concerning the words, 'heard a sound and attained the Way, saw forms and purified the mind,' Yün-men said, 'The bodhisattva Kuan-yin took the money and went to buy millet-cakes.' Then he lost his heart and said: 'However, from the very beginning they were just ordinary dumplings.' 

Ikkyū interprets the story in the following way:

When Kannon was manifested in the shape of a servant-maid,  
She fed her spirit dumplings and millet-cakes.  
Unforgettable are things I "had seen and heard" in former days,  
Just before me is the person who played a flute in Shan-yang.

The poet tries to stress the lack of any essential difference between millet-cakes and dumplings, because their only purpose is "to feed the spirit" of an enlightened person who is not supposed to make a distinction between these two material objects. The last line recalls words from the poem "Listening to a Flute in the Fei-ch'eng Garden" by Tou Mu (742–822) and also alludes to an old story from the Chin dynasty days. Hsiang Hsü was one of the "Seven Bamboo Grove Wisemen." When he heard about the execution of his friend Hsi K'ang in Shan-yang, he broke his lute into pieces. Later on, when passing by Hsi K'ang's former dwelling in Shan-yang, he suddenly heard sounds of a flute, recollected his late friend, and composed the "Ode of Recollections on the Past" (Wen hsüan, vol. 16).

Implicitly Yün-men is also present in a poem (from an eight-verse cycle, nos. 432–439) about "Ch'en the Sandals-Maker":

They babble about the Way, debate about Zen, multiply profits and glory.  
During the uprising, by his own efforts he created a fortress of lamentations.  
In vain he slammed the door to break Shao-yang's leg,  
But also broke the feelings of itinerant Zen monks.

Ch'en (real name: Chao-chou Tao-tsung, 780–877) inherited the Dharma from Huang-po and lived as a recluse at the Lung-hsing-ssu temple in Chao-chou. According to a tradition, he earned a living to support his aged mother by making straw sandals and selling them. The biography of Mu-chou Tao-tsung (another name was Ch'en Tsun-su) in the Wu-teng hui-yuan (vol. 4) reports
that when the rebellious troops of Huang Ch’ao entered the city, Mu-chou produced huge straw sandals and hung them on the city-gate. Huang Ch’ao could not take the sandals off the gate, so he proclaimed Mu-chou a great sage and left the city. The Yün-men (Shao-yang) biography in the *Wu-teng hui-yüan*, as well as the case in the *Pi-yen lu* (case no. 6), contains a story about how he thrice came to Mu-chou asking for an instruction. When Mu-chou cried, “Speak, speak!” Yün-men got embarrassed and Mu-chou tried to push him out. Then the master slammed the door with such a force that it broke Yün-men’s leg. At that moment, Yün-men made a loud cry and attained a “great awakening.”

Ikkyū’s poem starts with a condemnation of Zen discourses and traditional kōan practice. In the next line he makes a shift to praise Mu-chou for his courage at a critical moment. Perhaps Ikkyū evaluates his behavior during the time of rebellion as being more appropriate when considered from the standpoint of Zen teaching. On the other hand, Mu-chou’s arrogant attitude, glorified in many stories, is treated by Ikkyū with disgust as being unnecessarily cruel. In other poems Ikkyū consistently condemns similar rude methods of instruction. The last line ironically turns the statement upside down in calling the great spiritual experience the “breaking of the feelings of itinerant Zen monks.” After many years of wandering and visiting a number of distinguished masters, Yün-men attained satori while staying with Mu-chou, but he still was rejected and sent to Hsieh-feng, from whom he inherited the Dharma seal. The last line may also be interpreted as a capping phrase for the kōan.

Yün-men is mentioned again by Ikkyū in a reference to case 8 from the *Pi-yen lu*, which introduces poem no. 55: “At the end of summer retreat Ts’ui-yen addressed the community, ‘Since the very beginning of the summer I have been talking to you. Look! Do I still have eyebrows left?’ Pao-fu said, ‘A person who becomes a robber has an uneasy heart. ‘They will grow anew,” said Ch’ang-ch’ing. ‘Take care! A barrier [kuan]!’ replied Yün-men.” Ikkyū provides an elucidation of the kōan and mentions Ts’ui-yen Ling-ts’an (d. ca. 950), Pao-fu Ts’ung-tien (d. 928), Ch’ang-ch’ing Hui-chi (854–932), and Yün-men Wen-yen (d. 949) in metaphorical form:

“The kōan on eyebrows” is like a thorn inside mud:
Pao-fu and Yün-men chose the same road.
Ch’ang-ch’ing concealed his body, but manifested its reflection.
To the south of the tower there is the moon of the third wake.

The Buddhists believed that a person who distorts the Buddhist Dharma or Teaching will become a leper, and the first symptom of the disease is the falling out of eyebrows. Thus Ts’ui-yen’s question about his eyebrows is to be interpreted in this vein. Pao-fu hints that those who commit sins must become aware of this consequence Ch’ang-ch’ing tries to reassure the master by promising that the eyebrows will grow anew, while Yün-men abolishes the oppo-
sition by an indefinite exclamation "Kuan!" In the colloquial language of the T'ang and Sung periods, the word kuan also had the implication of "what the hell!" or "take care!" although the literal meaning of the character was "a border" or "an obstacle." Thus the two disciples shared their master's concerns, or as Daiō claims in his capping phrase to this kōan, "both of them followed the same road but not the same gauge." In contrast, by his indeterminate answer Ch'ang-ch'ing silently accepted the sins of Ts'ui-yen, and by assuring the teacher that his eyebrows would grow anew he feigned a stance of unconcern. Also, the first line alludes to Daiō's capping phrase, "Take care not to step on a thorn hidden inside mud," implying that the real meaning is hidden from ignorant persons. The last line contains a hint that for the person who grasped the meaning of the kōan "the moon of the third wake" will immediately appear in his enlightened mind.

Kōans in the Daitokuji Tradition

Ikkyū considered himself a follower of the transmission line of Japanese masters Daiō Kokushi and Daitō Kokushi that became the mainstream tradition of Daitokuji temple in medieval Kyoto. Daitō was known for his innovative capping phrase commentaries on kōans that were an important part of the Daitokuji oral tradition. Allusions to both of these spiritual predecessors are frequently found in Ikkyū's poetry. The first poem in the cycle, "Three Turning Phrases" of Daitō Kokushi" (no. 28), is prefaced by the phrase, "In the morning I 'connect our eyebrows' and in the evening 'join our shoulders.' What a person am I?"

I have just passed a barrier, another one is before me.
One cannot climb following only old samples and patterns.
These strange lichih fruits have a heavenly taste.
The name from the T'ien-pao era descended to people.

The verse focuses on the experience of Daitō, who as a disciple of Daiō grasped the meaning of the one-word kōan or "The Barrier" (kuan) and attained satori, only to face immediately another barrier. Ikkyū emphasizes the impossibility of realizing the highest truth only through textual sources and kōan training. He includes in the text a reference to delicious lichih fruits, the daily meal of Yang Kuei-fei, a consort of the T'ang Emperor Hsüan-tsung (712–756). The tragic fate of Yang Kuei-fei, murdered on the demand of soldiers who accused her of being the main source of turmoil brought on by the An Lu-shan rebellion during the T'ien-pao era (742–755), was repeatedly referred to by Ikkyū in his poetry as a classic example of a femme fatale and unhappy beauty at the same time. "The heavenly taste" of lichih put an end to the Heavenly Treasure (Tien-pao) era of rule.
Another example of this type of poetry is Ikkyū's reference (no. 157) to the "three turning phrases" of Chao-chou—"A clay Buddha can't pass across a river; a wooden Buddha can't pass through a fire; a metal Buddha can't pass through a furnace"—in which he tries to solve in a single blow the three problems of Chao-chou:

A poem is finished: sorrowful thoughts resemble a love song.
For many years I was listening to a night rain on a lonely bed.
Who had produced a flute tune from the tower?
The melody stopped abruptly; green peaks are across the river.

The "three turning phrases" of Chao-chou are mentioned in Pi-yen lu case 96, although Ikkyū's poem contains no direct allusions or comments on the case. The more obvious explanation happens here to be the least intricate. Ikkyū compares three insoluble situations from the kōan with his own inability to combine a strict monastic lifestyle on the mountain slopes with his unceasing ties to earthly joys. He solves the kōan in the last line's words, "green peaks are across the river." The poem has been completed, the love tune has suddenly become silent, all "three turning phrases" are effectively "capped" by a magnificent landscape that delimits any mundane passions and invites one to commune with and dissolve into its beauty.

By introducing some of his poems with a kōan case, Ikkyū often turned the poems into condensed and allegorical comments on the source cases, as with the introduction to poem no. 44: "A monk asked Yen-t'ou, 'What will happen if an old sail will not be raised?' 'A small fish will swallow a larger one,' answered Yen-t'ou. 'And what happens after the sail has been raised?' asked the monk. 'A donkey is nibbling grass in the backyard,' Yen-t'ou replied." The main character of the kōan is Yen-t'ou (827–887), who initially belonged to the Lin-chi school but later turned to the Kuei-shan school. The kōan may be found in a variety of texts, including the Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu, Tsu-t'ang chi, Wu-teng hui-yüan, Ch’an-men sung chi, and Ch’an-lin leichu; Hirano argues that Ikkyū's version is closest to the last of these. According to the Zen tradition, Hsü-t'ang (1184–1269), whom Ikkyū believed to be his spiritual Chinese forefather, attained satori after meditation on this very anecdote. Transmitted to Ikkyū by Daïō Kokushi, the kōan had great importance within the Daitoku-kuji tradition. Ikkyū comments on the kōan through allusions to a few other cases and supplants the original content with additional obvious and hidden connotations:

Cold and heat, sufferings and pleasures bring shame to mind.
Ears are originally only two pieces of skin.
One, two, three—yes!—three, two, one.
With a single twist of his hand Nan-ch’üan ripped the cat.
The first line alludes to the third of the "reflections" of Fo-yen Ching-yuan (1067–1120): "Sufferings and pleasures, anticipation and concordance—the Way is in between movement and immobility, cold and heat—I feel ashamed, repenting."  

Hirano, referring to an oral Daitokuji koan tradition, considers that the questions asked of Yen-t'ou correspond to anticipation and concordance. When a sail is not raised, the wind prevents a boat's movement, whereas after it has been raised, the wind pushes the boat forward. I would like to stress another opposition: the first situation is associated with stillness, and the second one with movement. Then the whole poem may be seen as a cryptic solution of the kōan. The first line contains two of the four expressions mentioned in "Fo-yen's reflections," although logically they have no connection with the kōan, and the next two lines traditionally have been associated with this kōan. In the oral Daitokuji tradition, the words "ears are only two pieces of skin" were applied as a capping phrase to the first answer in the kōan, "A small fish will swallow a larger one," while the words "fangs and teeth are just bones" were a capping phrase to the second answer in the kōan. However, this cannot be considered the only true answer.

According to the oral Daitokuji tradition, to the words "A small fish swallows a larger one" there is applied the capping phrase "Five, four, three, two, one." Sonja Arntzen considers the numerical image in its mirrorlike pattern to be an obvious illustration of the duality principle. The Daitō Kokushi goroku or recorded sayings text states that one day, having ascended to the hall, Daitō announced:

> If one attains in his heart a state inexpressible in words, it will pertain. When one wishes to express in words something that is impossible to comprehend by the heart, it will be "seven, six, five, four, three, two, one." [Someone asked,] "And what will happen if one has attained something in the heart and may express it in words?" After a pause he added, "After flowers have blossomed no efforts are necessary to make them grow. A spring wind will take care of them."

Perhaps in the above poem Ikkyū attempts to solve the problem by linking two figural sequences. The duality turns naturally into nonduality, and both number-orders conjoin into a single unit with an apex in the very middle of the line. The emphatic character *hsi* (translated here as "yes!" just to keep it in the translation) lacks any specific meaning and performs in Chinese poetry only an exclamatory function. The character *hsi* in the Japanese is also a homophone for the number "four" (C. *ssu*, but in Japanese both are pronounced as "shi"), becoming a pivot for the ascending and descending numerical order.

The last line of Ikkyū's poem alludes to a famous kōan from the *Wu-men kuan* (case 14) or the *Pi-yen lu* (case 63): "Once Nan-ch'üan noticed monks of the eastern and western halls disputing about a cat. Then he took the cat..."
and announced, 'If anyone talks, I will not kill him.' Nobody pronounced a
word. Then Nan-ch'üan ripped the cat apart.” A solution of the kōan is
found in case 64 of the Pi-yen lu: “Nan-ch'üan related what happened to
Chao-chou and asked what he would have done if he had been present at that
time. Chou took off his straw sandals, put them on his head, and left the hall.
‘If you had been there, the cat would still be alive,’ Nan-ch'üan exclaimed.”

Respect for Chinese Patriarchs

The names of famous Chinese Zen patriarchs are often mentioned by Ikkyū,
and the names of the early masters Lin-chi, Te-shan, Pai-chang, and Kuei-
shan are found especially frequently. One of the poems, called “A Man But
Not External Objects Has Been Grasped” (no. 14), is included in the cycle on
the “Four Alternatives of Lin-chi”:

The names of Pai-chang and Kuei-shan still exist;
Will not the fox and the water buffalo stay forever?
In the temple of the past dynasty there are no more monks.
Yellow leaves and autumn wind whirl above the tower.

This poem illustrates the state of mind after the subject has dissolved into the
object: any trace of sentient beings has disappeared and only the purity of
nature remains unchanged. Such a position was typical of the materialistic
school of Sarvastivada Buddhism. Once Lin-chi said, “The spring sun shines
and covers the earth with silk. A baby's hair hangs down in gray threads.”
That is, a person (subject) loses his self-importance when faced with the outer
universe (object) embodied in the phenomena of nature. The subject tries to
extrapolate himself into that illusory outer world, and such a view is as incred-
ulous as gray hair for a baby. The world remains harmonious notwithstand-
ing—or because of—the absence of human beings in it.

The names Pai-chang Huai-hai and Kuei-shan Ling-yu in the Ch’an tradi-
tion are associated with kōan stories about the wild fox and the water buffalo,
respectively. The story about the wild fox is reproduced in Wu-men kuan case
2 and numerous other kōan collections. According to this case, whenever Pai-
chang delivered sermons before his disciples, an unfamiliar old man appeared
in the assembly. One day after the sermon was over, he did not leave the hall
with the other monks. Pai-chang asked about his identity and the man an-
swered that in the distant past he was a monk at this very temple, but because
of his improper use of a turning word he was punished by being reborn for
500 lives as a wild fox. After the talk with Pai-chang the fox attained awaken-
ing and, as a result, became released from his wild fox transfiguration. He
proclaimed that his corpse would be found behind the temple compound and
asked that it be buried with the standard rite for Buddhist monks. That day
the monks indeed found a dead wild fox and cremated him. In a poem titled “Pai-chang’s Wild Fox” (no. 48) the content on the surface appears completely dissociated from the case:

A thousand mountains, ten thousand rivers, a monk’s hut.
This year I will surpass the fifth decade of my life.
But thoughts on my pillow are not senile yet.
As if in dreams I go on reading books of my youth.

Ikkyū juxtaposes his 50 years with the 500 lives of the monk in the case about Pai-chang and implicitly mentions his attachment to the traditional elegant (furuyū) style of aesthetics as represented in the “books of my youth” (which perhaps actually refers to erotic writings). The subject of karmic predestination and its compatibility with the content of the “wild fox” kōan are almost removed yet transferred into another level of sensual attachment to worldly pleasures that the poet has not yet completely suppressed.

On Three Categories of Handicapped Ones

The cycle of poems nos. 58–60 explicitly takes its roots in case 88 of the Pi-yen lu, where Hsüan-sha Shih-lei (835–908) mentions three categories of diseases: “Masters in different regions of China claim that they are spreading the Dharma and paying homage. But how can they instruct the three categories of deceased? The blind ones do not see the movements of their fingers, striking, putting down hands or sweeping the ground. The deaf ones do not hear the samādhi expressed by words. The mute ones cannot confirm that they had realized the Dharma. How can they be instructed? However, if such people cannot be instructed, it means that the Buddha’s Law has no miraculous properties.”

The poem “Blindness” (no. 58) advises that one rely on the invisible and not be attached to visible phenomena:

The writings from the Sacred Mountain were not inherited by the Blind Donkey.
Twenty-eight and six patriarchs are to be ashamed of it.
How can he reach the place of glimmering light?
His companion has a copper look and iron eyes.

Ikkyū often called himself “Blind Donkey” (Katsuro), hinting at the words of Lin-chi that after his death the Dharma will pass to a blind donkey. Perhaps Ikkyū, who refused to accept the “seal of enlightenment” (inka) from his teacher Kasō Sōdon, meant that he had obtained the real “transmission of the Dharma outside written words” in accord with the highly praised Zen practice
of discounting and discarding scriptures. The second line mentions the transmission of the Dharma from 28 Indian and 6 Chinese Ch’an patriarchs (from Bodhidharma to Hui-neng). “The place of glimmering light” is obviously the Pure Land (jōdo) of Amida Buddha, where his believers were supposed to be reborn and to enjoy eternal bliss. The “copper look and iron eyes” mentioned in a commentary on the gāthā of case 1 in the Pi-yen lu is a valued trait of an unusual person.

The next poem in the cycle, “Deafness” (no. 59), praises those who can hear melodies of the “stringless harp” and appreciate them:

Picked up a fly-whisk and made a cry like the hundred-times melted gold.
Because Huai-hai from his very birth had deep ears,
Who else might have such perfect hearing abilities
To listen to soundless melodies of a stringless harp?

The poem is pivoted on a story about Pai-chang in the Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu (vol. 6).27 Once he visited his master Ma-tsu Tao-yi. Upon his arrival, the master took from the meditation seat a fly-whisk and raised it up. “Do you use it or not?” asked Pai-chang. Ma-tsu returned the fly-whisk to its place. Pai-chang kept silent, and then Ma-tsu produced a loud cry. For three days after this Pai-chang was nearly deaf and could not hear anything but Ma’s voice, yet he was able to understand the meaning of Ma-tsu’s illuminative cry because he naturally had exceptionally perceptive (literally “deep”) ears.

In the poem “Muteness” Ikkyū once again insists that an enlightened person does not need any words to express his spiritual experience:

With a single phrase he wished to let out the content of his heart.
But the tongue stuck to the palate: only a weak “hi-hi”!
Ling-yūn did not respond to Ch’ang-sheng’s answer:
Who knows what golden words were in his heart.

Ikkyū’s poem alludes to a story from Ling-yūn’s biography in the Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu (vol. 11): “Ch’ang-sheng asked, ‘How could life appear before the chaos was separated?’ ‘In the womb of the hall pillar there is a fetus,’ answered Ling-yūn. ‘And what was after the separation of the chaos?’ ‘A lonely cloud floating across the sky.’ ‘Was it put into motion by the sky?’ The master did not give any answer. ‘In this case, if water were pure, fish would not live there,’ said Ch’ang-sheng. The master again kept silent.” Ling-yūn’s silence is a wordless answer that cuts off any discrimination: “the chaos” means complete nonduality, “a fetus in the hall’s pillar” corresponds to the state prior to differentiation, and “a cloud in the sky” refers to the level of provisional understanding by means of the realm of differentiation.
Ambivalent Attitudes toward Kōan Practice

Ikkyū’s attitude concerning the use of kōans as well as the importance of famous kōan collections was rather ambivalent. Although kōan cases are often used as sources for his poetry, the degenerated practice of using standard collections in Japanese monasteries in a routine, mechanical fashion was looked on with great disdain. In the poem “Reading the Preface to the Pi-yen lu” (no. 138) Ikkyū postulates his views on one of the most voluminous and prestigious of the kōan collections that is nearly inexhaustably exploited in so many of his poems:

Admonitions from Shen-shan cost a hundred golden pieces.
Having burnt them, he hoped to save both the present and the past ones.
Stop your disputes about the cold ashes!
The “merciful old hags” destroyed the Teaching.

The Pi-yen lu or Blue Cliff Record is perhaps the most famous and widely used among the kōan collections, and Ikkyū seems to have known it by heart. The collection of a hundred short cases accompanied by extensive comments, illustrative verses, and capping phrases was first compiled by a Sung monk, Hsüeh-tou Ch’ung-hsien (980–1052). Later on, Yüan-wu K’o-ch’in (1063–1135) appended them with his own comments, a version that was said to have been burned by Yüan-wu’s main disciple, Ta-hui Tsung-kao (1089–1163). The edition of 1308 contains a few prefaces. Hirano insists that the poem by Ikkyū is concerned mostly with the preface of Fang-hui Wan-li.28 The third line alludes to a phrase from that preface, “Chang-yen Ming-yuan warmed the cold ashes and had the text printed anew.” The “merciful old hag” (rôbôshin) was also mentioned in Fang-hui’s preface, “Hsüeh-tou and Yüan-wu had the heart of a ‘merciful old hag,’ ” that is, they combined a supreme sense of compassion with extensive discourse.29

The phrase “Admonitions from Shen-shan” refers to the Ling-ch’üan yüan monastery on Shen-shan Mountain, the place where Yüan-wu resided. Ikkyū again combines an ambiguous praising of the editor who restored the burned kōan collection with a straightforward accusation that he “destroyed the Teaching.” By citing the Pi-yen lu, Ikkyū in fact follows the way of his Chinese predecessor and expresses a kind of self-flagellation for his own overadherence to the practice that in other instances he himself had rejected.

In the poem “Master Ta-hui Burns the Pi-yen chi” (no. 72) Ikkyū praises the conduct of Ta-hui, who according to a popular tradition protested against an extreme reliance on the literary kōan tradition by destroying the original woodblock of the famous Pi yen lu:
The name of the old man of Miao-hsi will pertain for a thousand years. He had polished the Ch’an school and raised it above the others. In old days Tzu-hsü ordered Wu-wang to cut out his eyeballs. What a pity that a skull does not have shining eye-pupils!

“The old man of Miao-hsi” is Ta-hui Tsung-kao who once lived in a place of that name. The third line alludes to the biography of Wu Tzu-hsü in the Historical Record (Shih chi, section “Ch’un-ch’iu chang-kuo p’ien”). “When following the orders of Wu-wang, Wu Tzu-hsü was to commit suicide and said: ‘Plant a catalpa tree on my grave, so that I would be able to make of it a coffin for Wu-wang. And furthermore, cut out my eyeballs and fetch them to the eastern gate of the Wu kingdom, to let me see how the Yüeh barbarians destroy the Wu kingdom.’ ”

The last line refers to a story in the Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu (vol. 11): “A monk asked Hsiang-yen about the Tao, and the master answered: ‘A dragon sings on a dried tree.’ The monk did not understand. Then Hsiang-yen added, ‘A skull has shining eye-pupils.’ ” Ikkyū compares Ta-hui’s posthumous fate with that of Wu Tzu-hsü, pointing out that neither happened to see his desires fulfilled after death. Ta-hui’s attempt to eradicate the Pi-yen lu so as to prevent the degradation of the Ch’an spiritual essence and the ever-increasing formalization of kōan practice turned out to be a failure. In the ensuing centuries the Pi-yen lu became one the main devices used in Zen training, and Ikkyū’s poetry abounds in allusions and quotations from this work. This fact is itself ample evidence of the popularity of the text in fifteenth-century Japan.

Sharp Admonitions against His Own Brethren

At the same time Ikkyū angrily accused those who considered kōan practice the only trustworthy expedient means to attain satori as, for example, in the following two verses, “Respectfully Addressing My Steady Disciples” (nos. 225–226):

Round-headed profligates in monk’s robes!
They have a gorgeous appearance and people tremble on their approach.
Their main concern is to promote ancient cases.
Be ashamed of fostering in vain your smugness!

Do not claim that you had solved all the kōans.
An octagonal millstone lays above the heart.
You are unable to sense the smell of your own shit,
But distinctly see in a mirror the misdeeds of others.
"An octagonal millstone" (*hakku maban*) was mentioned for the first time by Yang-yi (964–1020), "An octagonal millstone flies through the air," and is an indication of innate abilities that are not easy to realize. In 1325 during a dispute at the Imperial court between a Tendai monk and Daitō Kokushi, the latter used it as a capping phrase when answering the question, "What is the meaning of a special transmission beyond the Teaching?" The two last lines were borrowed by Ikkyū from a commentary on case 77 of the *Pi-yen lu*, which stresses the difficulty in realizing the innate nature of a person (subject) as opposed to the ease of understanding the external world (object) of illusory phenomena.

Ikkyū goes on his attack against practices in vogue in the Japanese Zen monasteries in the poem “In Japan Comparisons Are Taken Literally” (no. 345):

> “Evaluating exams” involve people in lies, and they are permeated with a poison.  
> They initially contain the spirit of humble people, not of gentlemen.  
> Having found a metaphor in the mist they take it literally.  
> Lo-t’ien sang about “a moss robe and a cloudy belt.”

“Evaluating exams” (*kanben*) were a specific kind of Zen dialogue (*mondō*), when masters exchanged questions and answers to test the authenticity of satori experience. Lo-t’ien was another name of the poet Po Chü-i (772–846), whose poetry abounds with allegories and was highly popular among Japanese Zen monks. Ikkyū’s irony is aimed at those who take allegoric expressions like “a moss robe and a cloudy belt” literally though they mean only “a moss-covered boulder” and “clouds on the mountainous peak.”

**Breaking Rules Brings Them to Life**

Ikkyū’s own unconventional conduct was often shocking. He drank wine, visited brothels, ate fish, and befriended mavericks of all sorts. He believed that strict adherence to the Buddhist precepts is nothing but a sort of hypocrisy, yet he firmly held the single principle, “Do not do evil, do only good things.” His ironic smile is present in the poem “On the Precept ‘Do Not Drink Wine’” (no. 331):

> He emptied three bowls of wine but did not moisten his lips.  
> To compose poems when drunk is the only joy for Lo-t’ien.  
> But Master Leng was wondering:  
> Who on a nice day will be his companion in wine-drinking?
The first line alludes to the story from the *Ts'ao-shan lu* and the *Wu-men kuan* (case 10), "The monk Ch'ing Shui came to Ts'ao-shan and claimed that he was very poor and asked for alms. 'Acharya Shui!' called Ts'ao-shan. 'Yes, sir! ' answered Shui. 'You have drunk three bowls of tasty wine in the famous wine shop of Ch'ing Yuan, but did not moisten yet your lips.' "31 "Master Leng" refers to Ch'ang-ch'ing Hui-leng. His name is connected with the following story in the *Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu* (vol. 18): "Once addressing the community Ch'ang-ch'ing said, 'Though my singing is clear, you still do not understand me. What will you do if I arrive from the darkness?' A monk asked, 'What does it mean to arrive from the darkness?' 'You have emptied your tea-bowl, now you can leave,' said Ch'ang-ch'ing. Chung-ta said, 'Master, let him be your companion in tea-drinking.'"

Ikkyū replaces the words "companion in tea-drinking" (chaban) with "companion in wine-drinking" (shuban), reversing in this way the supposedly well-known "Master Leng's kōan." The poem consists of two parts: the first part is really connected with the wine-drinking kōan and the poet Po Lo-t'ien (Po Chü-i) known by his love of wine; the second part alludes to the kōan that originally contained not a single mention of wine, but Ikkyū intentionally transfers it from a reference to tea into a verse about wine. The opposition between parts is demolished, and the whole poem transcends into an affirmation of wine-drinking that is incompatible with the title. An apparent paradox adds an ironic vein and turns it into a kind of kōan. The first line was reproduced in another poem by Ikkyū, "Pleasure in Suffering" (no. 46), but here he made it more explicit by including the name of Tung-shan in the second line:

> You emptied three bowls of wine but did not moisten your lips:  
> With such words old Tung-shan consoled a lonely poor man.  
> As soon as you enter a burning house,  
> In a single moment an ache for ten thousand kalpas will appear.

Ikkyū's deep dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs in the Zen community was expressed in the poem, "In Former Days I Worshipped the Image of Daitō Kokushi, but Now I've Changed My Garb and Entered the Pure Land School" (no. 228).

> The Crazy Cloud is Hajun of the Daitokuji tradition:  
> I wish to put an end to the battles of demons in my community.  
> Of what use are "ancient stories" and kōans?  
> Instead of terrible sufferings I count now the treasures of others.

Ikkyū condemns the quarrels and doctrinal disputes between monks of Daitokuji and equates himself (Crazy Cloud) with Hajun (S. Pāpiyas), the king of
the demons who dwells in the Takejizai-ten heaven (S. Paranirmita-vasavartin) and who tries to create obstacles for buddhas striving to attain nirvāṇa. The name Hajun also recalls the name of the poet himself (Sōjun). The “terrible sufferings” may be interpreted as difficulties connected with the solving of kōans in Zen monasteries, while “counting treasures of others” is believed by some commentators to be the counting of rosary beads during the nembutsu recitations in the Pure Land tradition, which Ikkyū apparently practiced for a time.

We do not possess any reliable data about the reasons for Ikkyū’s short-term conversion to the Amidist creed. Perhaps it lasted only a few months and was an expression of dissatisfaction with the standards of Daitokuji and especially with the activities of its abbot, Yōsō, whom Ikkyū scolded and damned in any number of ways. He even wrote a set of works, called “Jikai-shū,” focused exclusively on condemning Yōsō. In the “Jikai-shū” he mentions that he converted to the Pure Land school in the sixth month of 1461, but before doing so he returned the image of the patriarch Daitō to the main temple of Daitokuji. Nevertheless, his biographical “Chronicle” (“Nempu”) contains not a single mention of such a conversion.

Ikkyū often pronounced self-accusations for his improper conduct based on an awareness that inevitable karmic retribution awaited him, as he claims in the poem, “Having Severed Ties with My Community, I Accuse Myself with This Gāthā” (no. 194):

Addressed disciples, presided over a community, built “devil palaces”;
“Since old days sweating horses have made incredible efforts.”
A master and an ordinary disciple are both equally crooks.
I feel pity for Han Hsin who lamented over a good bow.

The introductory words (suijī) to case 7 of the Pi-yen lu contain a phrase, “Since old days sweating horses had not had human knowledge, but wanted only to be retributed for making incredible efforts.” The lines allude to a poem in the Tung-shan wai chi that says:

When pacifying the Six States,
An immovable heart penetrates the eight cardinal points,
People do not notice that horses are sweating,
But want only to be retributed for making an incredible effort.

The poem implies a criticism of those soldiers who after a victory pay no attention to their sweating horses that actually brought them the victory. The line in the kōan shifts the image into the religious sphere to compare the effort of soldiers to that of monks striving to attain enlightenment. In both cases the auxiliary means are thrown away after the goal had been attained. Only a true
master is able to keep in mind the real device that brought him to the final aim. The last two lines allude to a story from the Historical Record (Shih chi, section “Yüeh-wang chü-shi shih-chia”) by Ssu-ma Ch’ien: “When Han Hsin was captured by Han-wang, he said, ‘When fast-running hares die out, good dogs are used for soup; when high-flying birds disappear, good bows are left aside; when a state is defeated, faithful ministers are executed.’” Ikkyū expresses regret about the position of Han Hsin, who scapegoated innocents for any failures suffered.

In the poem “Lamentations on the Degradation of the Daitokuji School” (no. 486), Ikkyū condemns his own Zen tradition in the harshest manner:

Who is the true master among descendants in the Eastern Sea?
They do not distinguish true and false; their knowledge is distorted.
Kyōun knows the smell of piss on his own body:
They are his elegant messages and love-poems.

A comment on case 77 from the Pi-yen lu says, “The smell of own’s shit is not sensed.” Later on Daitō used the words “he does not know the smell of his own shit” as a capping phrase. Ikkyū must have been aware of that expression, popular in the Daitokuji tradition, but preferred to turn it topsy-turvy to demonstrate his awareness of evil dwelling inside his lineage as well as in himself and his irresistible passion for composing verse.

Some of the major topics repeated consistently in the Kyōun-shū include the problem of keeping and breaking Buddhist precepts, praising the ancient Zen masters and paying tribute to some contemporaries, providing enigmatic comments regarding the authenticity of satori, or making casual remarks about current events. In fact, most of Ikkyū’s poems demonstrate striking deviations from the rules of classical Chinese prosody. They were written not to demonstrate his erudition and knowledge of versification rules but to hint, strike, or push toward spiritual awakening in the tradition of Lin-chi or Te-shan. Due to his extensive use of kōan stories through frequently ambiguous or ironic allusions, Ikkyū managed to enlarge the semantic field of his 28-character verses and went far beyond the limits and conventions of the gozan poetry of his contemporary composers of verse as part of the literary technique of the Rinzai “Five Mountains” monastic institution very much influenced by Sung Chinese culture.

Notes


2. The *Kyōun-shū* was published in Japanese many times from different manuscripts that sometimes differ considerably. The critical revised text that contains all the poems from the existing manuscripts was published by Itō Toshiko in the journal *Yamato bunka* 41 (1964): 10–59. It contains 1,060 numbered pieces. Because it has became standard practice to refer to those numbers, I follow this system in this chapter. The best annotated edition is the two-volume *Kyōun-shū zenshaku* (hereafter KSZ), I, ed. Hirano Sōjō (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1976), and II, ed. Kageki Hideo (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1997). It contains 881 poems. In 1972 Ichikawa Hakugen published the most authoritative Okumura manuscript in *Nihon zenka no shiso* in the series *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1972), which provides extensive annotations for the first 231 poems. Yanagida Seizan selected 300 of Ikkyū’s poems and published them accompanied by his interpretive renderings in modern Japanese and with detailed comments in Katō Shūichi and Yanagida Seizan, eds., *Ikkyū*, in *Nihon zen goroku*, vol. 12 (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1983). The Western-language publications by Sanford, Arntzen, Covell, etc. as cited in note 1 provide translations for more than 200 poems from Ikkyū’s collected verses accompanied by their own intricate interpretations and comments. These commentaries should be taken into account. Nevertheless, in most cases only a limited number of Ikkyū’s poems are discussed repeatedly while a large section of the most complicated pieces still awaits interpretation. To stress the complexity of the problem, I would like to mention a book by Yanagda Seizan, *Ikkyū: Kyōun-shū no sekai* (Kyoto: Jinbun shoin, 1980), that amounts to 250 pages but offers a profound analysis of only twelve poems from the *Kyōun-shū*.

5. T 48, p. 219b.

6. In a slightly modified form it was reproduced by Ikkyū in the poem “Wiping Filth with the Scriptures” (no. 70), “A dog pisses on the sandalwood old Buddha hall.” The scatological theme combined with sacrilegious notions in fact was used by Ikkyū as an extreme demonstration of the absence of any distinction between sacred and profane, pure and impure, or the use of the scriptures for reading or simply as a paper to wipe an ass.

8. KSZ, I:46.
13. “Turning phrases” (*tengo*) were used by Zen masters to confuse disciples, push them toward awakening and reveal the innate essence of the Dharma. In his preface Ikkyū quotes only the first among the three turning phrases of Daitō.
16. KSZ 1:41.
18. KSZ, I. 42-43.
19. Arntzen, Ikkyū and the Crazy Cloud Anthology, p. 103.
21. I thank Robert Duquenne at the Institute of Hōbōgirin, Kyoto, for suggesting this.
23. T 48, p. 194c.
27. KSZ I:138.
30. T 48, p. 204c.
31. T 48, p. 204a.
33. T 48, p. 147a.
34. T 48, p. 204c.