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The Traces of Ippen Shōnin: Healing, Contagion, and the Disputed Legacy of a
Wandering Saint

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Abstract

Ippen Shōnin (1234–1289) was a preacher of Pure Land Buddhism who traveled throughout the country offering tokens of rebirth in the Pure Land. Although he insisted that he had no personal power to guarantee good rebirth, the historical record seems ambiguous on this point. To analyze this, I first examine stories in the scroll *Ippen hijiri-e* attributing magical powers to Ippen. Ippen is sometimes described as if people saw him as a miracle worker, with descriptions of purple clouds and flowers falling from the sky, but the *Hijiri-e* depicts this with a deceptive agnosticism, as if its authors were unclear to whom the miracles ought to be attributed. I then look at two caricature scrolls critical of Ippen which provide records of a man manipulating the people around him. Ippen's ecstatic *nembutsu* dances are illustrated in an antagonistic way, and he is described as using his own urine as medicine, with the implication that he was defrauding his followers. These caricature scrolls were long considered irrelevant to Japanese scholarship on Ippen, until a radical outside interpretation forced scholars to consider them seriously. Viewed together, the caricatures and the *Hijiri-e* present Japanese high society conflicted over Ippen's legacy, unsure whether they had witnessed a madman or a god-man.

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1. Denials and Erasures

Ippen (一遍, 1234–1289) was a medieval Japanese preacher of the *nembutsu* 念仏, calling on the name of Amida Buddha for salvation. Large crowds would gather around him in marketplaces as he handed out paper slips called *fuda* 札 bearing Amida’s name, which scholar Ōhashi Shunnō memorably dubbed “tickets to heaven.” His followers, called Ji-shū 時衆 or “people of the hours” after their regular *nembutsu* chanting sessions, danced ecstatically with him in public spaces to celebrate Amida’s gift of salvation. Ippen intended to leave no impression on the world except for reciting the *nembutsu*, and he instructed the Ji-shū to only continue that great work and do nothing to remember him. Yet those who knew him well were unable to erase his memory from their thoughts and deeds, and he became a posthumous star. His half-brother Shōkai (聖戒, 1261–1323) memorialized his life in a set of twelve scrolls called the *Ippen hijiri-e* (一遍聖絵, 1299), which is considered a masterpiece of medieval art, perhaps even the greatest landscape painting made by any human being of the thirteenth century.¹

The *Hijiri-e* always shows Ippen as a small, sometimes hard-to-distinguish figure in a vast landscape. It never portrays him doing anything extraordinary, even when depicting a miracle.² Shōkai’s accompanying text similarly describes the locations Ippen visited as well as Ippen’s own words and contains frequent digressions unrelated to Ippen. The scroll visually and textually tries to honor Ippen’s desire to erase his uniqueness, even as it follows his life for twelve gorgeous volumes. Both text and art seem to struggle with what they are trying to accomplish. If the *Hijiri-e* is to be respectful and conscientious in its tribute to Ippen, it must deny that it is part of Ippen’s legacy, because he desired to have no legacy, as described in an anecdote handed down by his followers:

Someone asked: What have you decided should be done to preserve traces of yourself after your demise?

¹ Foard, “Ippen Shonin and Popular Buddhism”, p. 72, citing Toda, *Japanese Scroll Painting*, pp. 105-6.

² Foxwell, “The Pulled Back View: The *Illustrated Life of Ippen* and the Visibility of Karma in Medieval Japan,” p. 31.

Ippen answered: After my death, the absence of traces shall be my traces. What does it mean to leave traces behind? I have no idea. The traces of people in worldly life are treasures and property. Since they make traces into objects of attachment, these become sources of error. I have no treasures or property. I take leave of any mind of attachment. My traces lie solely where the nembutsu is said by all sentient beings. *Namu-amida-butsu*.³

In this answer, Ippen oscillates between hope that his absence of traces will become a legacy in itself, and uncertainty, not knowing what it means to leave or not leave a trace. Is it really possible to erase every trace of oneself? It appears that Ippen was at least willing to try, since he burned whatever works he had with him in the final weeks of his life. The *Hijiri-e* contains the following explanation for why he did so:

Ippen gave a few of the sutras he possessed to a monk from Mount Shosha. He had always said, “My propagation is for this lifetime only,” and now, while chanting the Amida Sutra, he burned the writings he possessed with his own hands. Seeing this, people deeply grieved that there was no one to transmit the teaching and that it would perish with the teacher, but Ippen said, “All the sacred teachings of Shakyamuni’s lifetime have wholly become *Namu-amida-butsu*,” in the spirit [of the statement in the Pure Land classic *Fashizan* 法事讃] that “when Shakyamuni finished his sermon, out of his kindness he bequeathed *Namu-amida-butsu* [to future generations],” for “in the age of *mappō* 末法 many will doubt and slander the Buddha’s teachings, and monastics and laypeople will dislike the Dharma and not bother to listen to it.” [Ippen] taught [us] this point well.⁴

The burned texts might have been other sutras, as Tachibana Shundō argues,⁵ or they might have been manuscripts written by Ippen, which the *Hijiri-e* is analogizing to the Buddha’s own teaching through the above *Fashizan* quotation. The mention of “a monk from Mount Shosha” spiriting away certain texts out of the hands of Ippen’s followers, and the explicit reference to the failure to name a successor “to transmit the teaching,” implies a concern by Ippen that his more ambitious followers would show off books once possessed by Ippen as proof that they were operating as his successor, rather than using them as texts to read. We can therefore read this statement alongside what the *Hijiri-e* claims to be Ippen’s desires for his own burial:

After I die, my disciples are not to mourn with funeral rites. I should be exposed in the open fields [for animals to feed on]. There is no need, however, to apply this prohibition to laypeople who seek to effect bonds with Dharma [by holding a funeral].⁶

³ Fujiwara, *Ippen Shōnin goroku*, 92-3. Translation adapted from Hirota, *No Abode*, p. 117. This anecdote is only found in *Goroku*.

⁴ *Ippen hijiri-e*, section 45 (scroll 11), text given in Tachibana, *Ippen shōnin zenshū*, 109. First half of translation is adapted from Dennis Hirota, “The Illustrated Biography of Ippen,” in *Buddhism in Practice*, ed. Donald Lopez (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 577.

⁵ Tachibana, “Ippen to shinbutsu shūgō,” p. 4.

⁶ *Ippen hijiri-e*, section 48 (scroll 12), text given in Tachibana, *Ippen shōnin zenshū*, 118. Translation adapted from Hirota, *No Abode*, p. 124.

No funeral meant no chosen successor to officiate; a body left in a field meant no gravestone to build a temple around. But Shōkai, the author of the *Hijiri-e* who attended to Ippen at his deathbed, made full use of the supposed exemption for laypeople, granting a group of local devout laity the right to officiate over a formal funeral and cremation. The final panel of the massive scroll shows monks bowing and chanting before two objects of worship: Ippen's bones enshrined in a stone pagoda, and what appears to be Ippen himself standing inside a small structure, probably representing a painted statue of him but with an uncanny vividness, as if he were still alive. Was it really Ippen's will to allow the laity to create such a legacy for him, an eternal resting place for a lifelong wanderer?

Ippen desired to erase his own record and deny the ambitious among his followers an inheritance to build on or claim legitimacy from. The *Hijiri-e* acknowledges this and is carefully written so that none of the acts taken by his followers after his death seem to run directly against his will. But in the end, despite his protest that "my propagation is for this lifetime only," a new sect of Buddhism was eventually founded, the Ji-shū 時宗. This presents us with a problem. With Ippen's confidence in his own salvation and the salvation of those he was able to present with *fuda*, why did he worry about questions of succession and inheritance? Were there indeed traces of himself that he regretted and wished to extinguish? Despite the *Hijiri-e*'s acclaimed realism, does it conceal such traces?

In this essay I will argue for the existence of such traces and the instability that they created for his followers. First, I will look at the way in which the world of the *Hijiri-e* seems to derive some enchantment from Ippen's presence, ensuring that the embers of his saintly mark would still burn in Japanese society after his departure. Following this, I will look at two caricature scrolls critical of Ippen that seem to have been produced based on eyewitness accounts. These caricatures record an Ippen whose power is twisting the behaviors of people around him. Viewed together, the caricatures and the *Hijiri-e* present Japanese high society conflicted over Ippen's legacy, unsure whether they had witnessed a madman or a god-man.

2. Explaining the Enchanted World

Ippen's desire was for salvation to be a matter of simple fact, originating from neither specific activities nor a heart of pure faith. For this reason, the *Hijiri-e* records him as rejecting the appearance of purple clouds above him and flowers falling from the sky, which in the symbolism of the time would have served as proof that he was destined for the Pure Land. The text describes the purple clouds but does not depict them visually, and offers an explanation from Ippen as follows:

Someone asked anxiously about their significance. Ippen replied, “concerning the flowers, ask the flowers, about purple clouds ask the clouds: I do not know.”⁷

In a letter attributed to Ippen, he elaborates: “Further, do not purple clouds and flowers falling from the heavens ... lie beyond the reckoning and comprehension of foolish beings?”⁸ The *Hijiri-e* does not omit the story of the purple clouds, but rather offers both the clouds and his agnostic reaction to them. His concern seems to be that relying on outward signs of salvation would lessen the undeniable, natural fact of rebirth in the Pure Land.

In 1998, James Foard offered an excellent theoretical argument on the specific contribution that Ippen made to Buddhism of his time. Rather than simply reject the overeager 20th-century analogy between New Kamakura Buddhism and the Protestant Reformation, Foard closely investigated the types of changes being made. Showing how Ippen decided to offer a *fuda* to a monk who read many Buddhist texts and had come to disbelieve the nembutsu, and how the deity of Kumano appeared before Ippen to affirm the correctness of this decision, Foard found that Ippen was thus given the authority to reject “both an expressive and an instrumental understanding of nembutsu practice.”⁹

Foard points out that when Ippen decided to offer this *fuda* to someone with no faith, he is disavowing the idea that salvation comes from expression of faith. Instead, Ippen “presents the *nembutsu* as a ritual that is done for itself and that expresses itself, and in this sense only is instrumental and expressive. It has no other end or reference.”¹⁰ This image of the “nembutsu expressing itself” is virtually drawn from Ippen’s own words: “Saying the Name from moment to moment, then, is the nembutsu saying the nembutsu.”¹¹ One modern writer, Watanabe Yoshikatsu 渡辺喜勝, distinguishes Ippen from the other famous Kamakura Pure Land preachers in this way: Hōnen saw the nembutsu as man crying out for Amida, Shinran saw it as Amida crying out to man (hence the emphasis on not saying but “hearing the nembutsu” among Shin Buddhists), but Ippen saw it as Amida speaking to himself.¹²

If we take this to be an accurate summary of Ippen’s beliefs, then his ideal holy man would be not different from Amida in any way, and would not leave behind any traces that did not come from Amida. Certainly, one whose very teachings dissolved into *namu-amida-butsu* would not be generating any sanctity from his own person other than that which originated in Amida. In agreement with this reading, Foard observes that in the *Hijiri-e*, sacred locations retain the ability to produce miracles only because Ippen is able to summon the miraculous power of the *nembutsu*.¹³ He concludes that Ippen’s mission was to detach Buddhism from sacred locations and feudal patronage to make it universally accessible: “the replacement of localized hierarchies with some systematic,

⁷ *Ippen hijiri-e*, section 22 (scroll 6), text given in Tachibana, *Ippen shōnin zenshū*, 43-4; translation adapted from Hirota, *No Abode*, p. 121.

⁸ *Ippen Shōnin goroku*, translated in Hirota, *No Abode*, p. 31.

⁹ Foard, “What One Kamakura Story Does: Practice, Place, and Text in the Account of Ippen at Kumano,” p. 106.

¹⁰ Foard, “What One Kamakura Story Does,” pp. 107-9.

¹¹ *Ippen Shōnin goroku*, translated in Hirota, *No Abode*, p. 79.

¹² Nagashima, “Nenbutsu ga nenbutsu o mōsu shinkō,” p. 66.

¹³ Foard, “What One Kamakura Story Does,” p. 111.

ahistorical, replicable means of salvation.”¹⁴ Describing this as the “delocation” of Buddhism, he analogizes it not to the Protestant Reformation, but to the rise of Christianity in late antiquity.

The truth of Foard’s assertion about the “delocation” of salvation is borne out in Ippen’s wanderings throughout the country and his ability to bring enlightenment to every type of place, but parts of this analogy apply better to other Kamakura Buddhists than they do to Ippen. Christianity really did *replace* and *displace* prior beliefs about localized spirits and deities with the power to punish and reward, by providing Europeans with a new, universal, replicable soteriology. Nichiren, and to a lesser extent Hōnen, pushed for a similar displacement. These monks considered their own practices to be the “exclusive” road to salvation—Foard here offers the Japanese keyword *senju* as an equivalent.

But the *Hijiri-e* is written from a different angle. As it tells the story of Ippen, it illustrates the shrines and temples he visited and goes to seemingly unnecessary length to tell stories of their miraculous origins (*engi*), reaffirming the sanctity of these preexisting places and the miracles associated with them. Since these details do not tell us anything new about Ippen, it feels as if the author and artist are protesting against an unspoken claim of “delocation” by their contemporaries.¹⁵

While the *Hijiri-e*’s Ippen is radically destructive in his desire to erase social distinctions and his own traces, crediting every miracle to Amida, he is also radically affirmative. He brings the power of the *nembutsu* out of the temples and into the marketplace, but he also acknowledges the residences of the kami in the ancient shrines, and the kami come to greet him, especially the deity of the Kumano shrine whose descent from above is actually illustrated in the scroll. The *Hijiri-e* shows Ippen visiting eighteen shrines in total, praying at each one. He also affirms the meaning of temples and reawakens the Buddhas living within them.

In 1293 Ippen visited the Shingon temple Jimoku-ji 甚目寺, located in Ama City, and began a seven-day fast in front of the golden Kannon. As the fast neared its conclusion his followers’ health began to fail, but he promised them that they would not die. Scroll 6 of the *Hijiri-e* explains what happened next.

That night, two lay believers sleeping in the Kiyosu inn had the same dream. The Bishamon statue next to the Kannon came to their inn and announced, “These visitors are dear to me. You must make an offering.” [The next day,] when they came with an offering of food and liquor, a breeze blew away the curtain and they were shocked to see that just as in their dream, the Bishamon statue had left his seat and was now in a standing position.¹⁶

The *Hijiri-e* illustration shows Ippen’s followers amazed to see the statue standing upright. We can see, through the resistance against showing Ippen effecting some miraculous change on the world or summoning purple clouds above him, something that

¹⁴ Foard, “What One Kamakura Story Does,” p. 114.

¹⁵ Kaufman, “Nature, Courtly Imagery, and Sacred Meaning in the *Ippen Hijiri-e*,” p. 64.

¹⁶ Tachibana, *Ippen shōnin zenshū*, p. 52, my translation.

superficially resembles a modern naturalism or agnosticism: the miracle is presented in the text, the artist portrays the incident with naturalism, and the reader is permitted to view Ippen from a serene, objective distance and consider the miracle as an example of the saving power of the nembutsu.

But it would be incorrect to see Ippen and his Ji-shū as cool, disinterested preachers of salvation, and we can see this in the way another category of miracle is systematically downplayed or omitted from the text: the type seen as emanating from Ippen himself. Tales of such occurrences may have accounted for some of Ippen's popularity among common people, but before a Canadian First Nations activist brought it to the attention of Japanese scholars in 1987, this category of miracle was scarcely taken seriously as a reading of Ippen.

3. Miracles of the Body

Our story begins with a rather crude caricature of Ippen in the comic scroll *Tengu zōshi* 天狗草紙, which may have been completed as early as 1296, before the *Hijiri-e* itself. The scroll, which is still extant today, depicts Ippen dropping his robes to urinate into a tube being held by one of his followers, while a crowd reacts in a delightful variety of ways. A nun covers her eyes, but two monks look on gleefully. Other townspeople turn to look at the scene with astonishment, and the author has clearly relished writing up imaginary conversations around their heads like a modern-day comic book:

“Look at all these people begging for some piss!”
 “This is Ippen Shōnin’s beloved piss, it cures every ailment!”
 “What a crowd! I hope he’s got a full bladder!”
 “The nun can’t see, so she’ll wash her eyes [with piss]!”
 “I’m drinking Shōnin’s piss for my stomach issues.”
 “Hey, this man needs some too!”¹⁷

Tengu zōshi is one of two contemporary texts offering a critical view of Ippen, calling his Ji-shū movement “the height of stupidity” (the other, *Nomori kagami* 野守鏡, refers to him more plainly as a “madman”). It vividly illustrates the Ji-shū’s *nembutsu* dances to show the crazed effect Ippen had on uneducated people around him.¹⁸ It was basically hot off the press as soon as Ippen died, and was in fact produced in the same studio that made Ji-shū’s official narrative scroll, the *Yugyō Shōnin engi e* (遊行上人縁起絵, circa 1303-07).¹⁹

It is not quite accurate to say that *Tengu zōshi* and *Nomori kagami* were totally unknown to modern Ippen scholars. A study authored during World War II used *Tengu zōshi*’s wild portrayals of Ippen and the Ji-shū in order to dismiss the movement as a disorderly abuse of Buddhism. However, after the war, new interpretations emerged,

¹⁷ Translated from Sunagawa, *Ippen Hijiri-e kenkyū*, 177, compared with suggested readings from Kanai, “Ippen Shōnin no nyōryōhō”.

¹⁸ Kuroda, *Sugata to shigusa no chūseishi: ezu to emaki no fūkei kara*, p. 16.

¹⁹ Tsuchiya, “*Tengu zōshi* no sakuga kōbō”.

seeing Ippen as a dramatic figure and the Ji-shū as influential to the reform and revival of medieval Buddhism.²⁰ During this period, Ippen scholars conspicuously ignored *Tengu zōshi*, despite the fact that it is a primary source that possibly predates the *Hijiri-e*. Foard's 1977 dissertation, written in consultation with Japanese Ippen scholars, omits it entirely from his list of biographical sources for Ippen, even though he lists a source that he finds "virtually useless" for the sake of completeness.²¹ Evidently it was seen as a meaningless and baseless slander.

The coming of a paradigm shift could be seen in 1986, when the historian Kuroda Hideo (黒田日出男, b. 1943) started to look more closely at the meaning of the caricature as part of a study of illustrated scrolls.²² But it was an article in *Daihōrin* magazine by a non-academic named Miyamatsu Hiroyuki (宮松宏至, b. 1940) that forced the hand of scholars. Miyamatsu argued that urine therapy was common in premodern times and was mentioned in religious texts such as the New Testament. Critiquing a description of *Tengu zōshi* given by an academic biographer, he reasoned that Ippen could not have been such a "rock star" based on his chanting and dancing alone and suggested that the Ji-shū frequently drank Ippen's urine for health purposes just as the scroll depicts, and that this was simply omitted from the major hagiographical sources by elite monks who found it embarrassing or inconvenient.²³

Some Ippen scholars refer to Miyamatsu Hiroyuki as a "doctor" but this is not technically true. Miyamatsu is best described as an indigenous rights activist turned urine therapy advocate. Emerging as an activist from Japan's New Left student movement, he spent two years living with Asabiinyashkosiwagong people in Northwestern Ontario who suffered mercury poisoning from a Canadian factory upstream of their reservation. When poisoning victims came to him for medical advice due to their inability to access Canadian health care, he became invested in home therapies. After initially opening a free acupuncture clinic, he learned about urine therapy from a Tanzanian refugee and began drinking his own urine while in Canada.²⁴ Encountering strong cultural resistance to this home remedy upon return to Japan, he spent some time researching premodern medicine. His article in *Daihōrin* makes a connection that prior scholars had missed, namely the prominence of urine therapy in an era when most people had few other medicines available to them, and extols Ippen's healing power.

It may seem dubious that such an eccentric individual was responsible for a major intervention in Ippen studies, so I will note that multiple Ippen specialists have acknowledged their thought was shaped by Miyamatsu's article, starting with Kanai Kiyomitsu in 1988, followed by Foard's mentor Ōhashi Shunnō in 2001, then Sunagawa

²⁰ Sakurai, *Ippen to Ji-shū no nazo*, pp. 22-37.

²¹ Foard, "Ippen Shonin and Popular Buddhism," p. 87. *Tengū zōshi* does receive mention in a footnote, at 259n51, as an example of popular literature mocking the dancing *nembutsu*.

²² Kuroda, *Sugata to shigusa*, pp. 15-29. Kuroda analyzes the urine distribution, but he devotes more space to a depiction of two Ji-shū women in an apparent lesbian relationship. As far as I can tell, of the later Ippen scholars only Sunagawa Hiroshi has read Kuroda's analysis closely.

²³ Miyamatsu, "Ippen Shōnin no myōyaku".

²⁴ Miyamatsu, *Start Your Day with a Glass of Urine*.

Hiroshi in 2002.²⁵ The magazine which published Miyamatsu, *Daihōrin*, was a non-sectarian space where Buddhist practitioners, spiritual seekers, and other kinds of believers could interact with sympathetic scholars; it was discontinued in July 2020.²⁶

The scholar Kanai Kiyomitsu (金井清光, 1922–2009) was the most openly enthusiastic about Miyamatsu's article and urine therapy generally. Taking to the pages of *Daihōrin* to offer his assent, he declared that Miyamatsu has "raised a new problem in Ippen studies," that *Tengu zōshi* is indeed based on real events, and that past scholars overlooked it only because of their squeamish modern sensibilities. As evidence, he provided medieval Japanese and Chinese medicine texts which discuss drinking the urine of children or babies to cure certain diseases.²⁷ Such medical texts were often preserved and used by Buddhist specialists and drew on Chinese and Indian knowledge. The use of excrement in particular was legitimated through Ayurvedic beliefs that anything can be used as medicine, although "there is ambiguity concerning the vile or unclean nature of these products in the Buddhist context."²⁸

In 2001, Ōhashi Shunnō (大橋俊雄, 1925–2001) quoted from one of Kanai's sources but jumped to a novel conclusion, saying that anyone's urine would have worked equally well, so such medical practice would not have been so unusual at the time.²⁹ This does not seem like a natural conclusion to draw from the sources being discussed. Presumably, the texts specify children rather than adults because their urine was believed to have fewer impurities. Furthermore, *Tengu zōshi* portrays the practice in order to belittle Ippen and his followers, as if he was offering himself to them as a god-man whose waste fluids are not only pure but have healing properties.

In his initial response to the three preceding opinions, Sunagawa Hiroshi (砂川博, b. 1947) investigated *Tengu zōshi* more closely, finding that it associates four activities with Ippen: dancing *nembutsu*, *fuda* distribution, purple clouds and flowers from the heavens, and urine distribution. Because the other three incidents are affirmed by the *Hijiri-e*, and on the strength of Kanai's argument that the blind, lepers, and other outcasts were likely seeking some physiological healing from Ippen, Sunagawa concluded that *Tengu zōshi*'s bawdy caricature probably expresses some "truth" that Ippen acquired knowledge of herbal medicine during his time in the mountains. Sunagawa also opined that this was omitted from the *Hijiri-e* because physiological medicine was considered in some sense an "unclean" activity for monks akin to drinking urine. He rejected the idea that Ippen actually offered his urine as a medicine, but he did not explain why.³⁰

Following his initial foray into the subject, which seems to me incomplete, Sunagawa wrote two further articles further investigating the reliability of *Tengu zōshi* and what conclusions can be reasonably drawn from it. Sunagawa points out that *Tengu zōshi* gets a number of basic facts wrong about Ippen. It refers to his followers "Ikkō-

²⁵ Imai, *Ippen*, 171, also refers to Miyamatsu in a more dismissive way.

²⁶ Tangentially, it is notable that the decline of such non-sectarian spaces has pushed people into sectarian spaces; as of 2024, Miyamatsu is now a member of the new religious group Happy Science, even as he continues his indigenous activism online.

²⁷ Kanai, "Nyōryōhō."

²⁸ Despeux, "Chinese Medicinal Excrement," p. 162.

²⁹ Ōhashi, *Ippen hijiri*, pp. 91–3.

³⁰ Sunagawa, *Hijiri-e kenkyū*, pp. 277–282.

shū” rather than Ji-shū, and incorrectly says that Ippen refused to pray at *kami* shrines. Both of these mistakes are casually confusing Ippen with other street preachers of the period. On the other hand, *Tengu zōshi* accurately portrays dancing *nembutsu*, which the Ji-shū seem to have deemphasized after Ippen’s death.³¹ We are led to wonder about the exact target of *Tengu zōshi*’s critique. Was it Ippen in particular, or unsettling new developments in Japanese Buddhism generally?

Haruko Wakabayashi’s (b. 1967) groundbreaking 2012 monograph on *Tengu zōshi* concludes that it is both. *Tengu zōshi* elaborates on the classical image of the *tengu*, an impure monster “associated with the privy and feces,” as well as the dark realm of *ma*, devils or delusion. While all of Japanese Buddhism is depicted as infested with *tengu*, Ippen in particular is portrayed as the “chief of the *tengu*” who deceives people with false miracles. His faith in Amida alone is portrayed as splitting Japanese Buddhism into sects, threatening the health and security of the nation. In essence, the authors of the *Tengu zōshi* sensed the coming of a disturbance in court Buddhism, and Ippen was the most prominent representative of this.³²

Wakabayashi sees urine distribution as central to *Tengu zōshi*’s attack on Ippen in two ways. First, it associates Ippen with the impurities of bodily waste, and thereby with *tengu*. Ippen is polluting the dharma by mixing purity with impurity. Second, urine distribution is contrasted against *fuda* distribution, which is caricatured elsewhere in the scroll with the same ironic tone. Wakabayashi sees *Tengu zōshi* as accusing Ippen of distributing *fuda* only to elites in a self-serving way, summarizing its depiction as follows: “To commoners he gives out his urine, to the wealthy he offers *fuda*.”³³

The anonymous creators of the *Tengu zōshi* scrolls were defenders of a court Buddhism that was on its way to anachronism. In the words of Abe Yasurō (阿部泰郎, b. 1953), they “belonged to a world that was collapsing from within.” The scrolls portray Japan’s Buddhist education and law as being established “through the vows of emperors,” and monks as transforming into *tengu* through lack of humility towards the court and self-centered arguments about the dharma.³⁴ In characterizing Ippen as “chief of the *tengu*,” the authors were aiming to situate him within this polemical worldview rather than making a faithful record of his actual stated beliefs or practices, and they indeed may have confused rumors about him with other preachers.

Nevertheless, Wakabayashi believes that urine distribution actually did happen, since other practices which *Tengu zōshi* attributes to Ippen have been borne out as correct.³⁵ For instance, the official record of Ippen’s sayings passed down by the Ji-shū did not mention Ippen’s ecstatic dances celebrating the *nembutsu*, suggesting that the sect was embarrassed by the practice.³⁶ The *Hijiri-e* corrects the record, giving a history lesson to readers by explaining that the dancing *nembutsu* was introduced by the ancient

³¹ Sunagawa, “Shōkai wa Ippen, Jishū hihan to dō mukiatta ka,” see pp. 6 and 16-18.

³² Wakabayashi, *Seven Tengu Scrolls*, see pp. 113, 116 and 167.

³³ Wakabayashi, *Seven Tengu Scrolls*, p. 116.

³⁴ Abe, “The Book of Tengu,” see pp. 216 and 225.

³⁵ Wakabayashi, *Seven Tengu Scrolls*, p. 116.

³⁶ Sunagawa, “Jishū hihan,” p. 6.

master Kūya, and that “Kūya’s words imbued [Ippen’s] heart and were constantly at his lips.”³⁷ Here, we can see how *Tengu zōshi* forced suppressed aspects of Ippen’s life into the foreground and seemingly engendered a response from the authors of the *Hijiri-e*, similar to the response that Miyamatsu’s quotations from *Tengu zōshi* elicited from Ippen scholars hundreds of years later.

I recognize two separate claims by which we can assess the reasonability of the *Tengu zōshi* caricature. The first is the generic association of Ippen’s form of Pure Land teachings with healing power. Sunagawa and other researchers have found that although the *Hijiri-e* never explicitly supports such an argument, it does give us circumstantial evidence that Ippen was seen as a healer. The second is a more specific claim that Ippen’s body was believed to be uniquely pure, so that contact with the traces of his body could heal disease. The Japanese scholars have not closely investigated this thread of the caricature, but I will show that this is also supported circumstantially by the *Hijiri-e*. I will argue that the embodied, karmic nature of purity, impurity, and contagion is in fact a key point of contention between the *Tengu zōshi* and the *Hijiri-e*.

4. Ippen the Healer?

Although Ippen is never described as healing anyone in the *Hijiri-e*, in a few instances the text implies that he was understood to have healing powers, while still leaving his agency in the healing ambiguous. First, it makes some pointed references to locations in Kyoto: a Yakushi temple named Inabadō 因幡堂 and a house of charity called Sanjō Hiden’in 三条悲田院. Ippen came to Inabadō and used it as a headquarters around 1279, and a monk who tried to keep him from lodging there was visited by the medicine Buddha Yakushi Nyorai in a dream, who warned that Ippen was a “valued guest.” Sunagawa argues that it would not have been lost on a period reader that Ippen was being favored by a Buddha associated with medicine. Furthermore, Sunagawa writes, it is notable that Ippen spent a day and night meditating in Sanjō Hiden’in, a charity house associated with the blind, lepers, and other people rendered impure through contagious illness. The text does not say that he met with any of the residents, but because he stayed the night, it is implied that he was not afraid of the contagion.³⁸

Another anecdote from the *Hijiri-e* tells of a specific healing incident. This story, found in scroll 5, runs as follows:

When he entered the land of Hitachi, there was a villainous samurai there who tried to rape one of the Ji-shū nuns [but failed to catch her and went home]. In a dream, the scoundrel saw a monk holding a split branch who said to him, “Unthinkable to impede a *nembutsu* practitioner!” and hit him with the branch. When he awoke he was paralyzed and could not make his body move. His father ran to Ippen and pleaded with him to rescue his son. Ippen said, “I don’t know anything about this; I will not interfere,” but the father pleaded again

³⁷ Hirota, *No Abode*, p. xxxvi, xxxix.

³⁸ Sunagawa, *Hijiri-e kenkyū*, pp. 273–5.

and again, so eventually Ippen said, “very well, let us go,” and upon arriving [at the house] the man's paralysis was quickly cured.³⁹

Sunagawa calls this story an affirmation of Ippen's healing powers, but as Caitilin Griffiths points out, another modern commentator, Shinmura Taku 新村拓, reads the text as affirming only the power of the *nembutsu* to punish those who impeded its practitioners.⁴⁰ The text is ambiguous, and when read carefully we see that it is structured to preserve the ambiguity. The scoundrel sees a “monk” in his dream, not a Buddha or bodhisattva, but it is unclear who the monk is, and Ippen denies that it was him. The father pleads with Ippen to provide healing, but it is unclear whether Ippen did any specific act to cure the paralysis or if Ippen's presence simply provided some emotional relief. We are led to believe that there is some sort of karmic punishment involved and that people believed Ippen could both inflict and cure severe maladies, but the text does not tell us whether this was actually the case.

All of this may sound deceptively modern and agnostic to our ears. The text's concern, however, is not to reject the idea of healing power. Rather, the author Shōkai is squeamish over explicitly asserting Ippen's agency. We see direct textual evidence of this squeamishness in scroll 5, which offers the story of a woman known as “the sister of Ōi no Tarō,” who invites Ippen to dance in her home, and of her eventual rebirth in the Pure Land:

Since several hundred people had danced round and round, they had trodden down and broken the floorboards. But when people said, “You had better repair them,” the sister replied, “These will be keepsakes of Ippen the holy man. I won't repair them,” and she left them as they were. We should consider this in the way that we consider that time long ago when Emperor Cheng of Han refused to repair the balustrade broken by Zhu [Yun], in order to remember the words of that loyal retainer. After this, that woman practiced only the *nembutsu* and in the end attained birth in the Pure Land.⁴¹

The broken floorboards leave a physical trace, but of what? According to the text, it is a “keepsake [*katami*] of Ippen the holy man [*hijiri*].” Laura Kaufman notes that in the illustration, above the scene flies a flock of wild geese, which provides a subtle symbolism: “the geese flying toward the house of Ōi no Tarō and his sister suggest their hopeless desire for Ippen's return.”⁴² Yet the text seems slightly hesitant to clarify the meaning of such “keepsakes.” Might this woman have seen Ippen's footprints as relics with special powers, like the Buddha's footprints? In the text, Shōkai offers an obscure Chinese analogue for using unrepaired broken objects to preserve a memory and explains the benefit to the householder in terms of her rebirth.

³⁹ *Ippen hijiri-e*, section 20 (scroll 5, section 4), original given in Tachibana, *Ippen shōnin zenshū*, 39, my translation.

⁴⁰ Griffiths, “Tracing the Itinerant Path: Jishū Nuns of Medieval Japan,” p. 70.

⁴¹ *Ippen hijiri-e* section 17 (scroll 5), Japanese text given in Tachibana, *Ippen shōnin zenshū*, 35-6, translation partially adapted from Kaufman, “Nature,” p. 55. (The Confucian analogy is my translation.)

⁴² Kaufman, “Nature,” p. 55.

Like the historical precedent, Shōkai cites for the dancing *nembutsu*, the purpose of this unexpected and jarring reference to Chinese history appears to be to make Ippen's footprints into a rational memento of virtue rather than one aspect of Ippen's traces that could provide a special power. The benefit of this memento is not physical healing but rebirth in the Pure Land, although one wonders how Shōkai is so confident of this, given Ippen's own skepticism of such signs as purple clouds and flowers. And as with the scoundrel of Hitachi and the two temples in Kyoto, the question of Ippen's own agency in bringing about that rebirth is carefully avoided.

Another, even more obscure moment in the *Hijiri-e* suggests that aspects of Ippen's healing power are being excluded from primary sources. A long-acknowledged mystery of the *Hijiri-e* is the unclear connection between Ippen and saunas. At the end of scroll 3, we see a depiction of a monk using a sauna at a point in the narrative corresponding to 1276. The *Hijiri-e* explains that when Ippen met his Pure Land teacher Shōdatsu in the city of Dazaifu, a few days' trip from the famous hot springs town of Beppu, a sauna was built for them, which they shared together while having long and happy conversations about Buddhist practice. At this point, the narrative leaves a gap of several months.⁴³ Following Ippen's death, his self-appointed successor Shinkyō became involved in managing saunas for the care of wounded samurai, and it is today claimed that Ippen founded an eponymous healing sauna in Beppu in this missing year 1276.⁴⁴ The earliest written record of this claim dates to 1742; it is not found in the *Hijiri-e* or other early texts (although the 1742 document predates one of the primary sources for Ippen, *Ippen Shōnin goroku*, by more than two decades). The sauna was said to have been "revived" by a Ji-shū leader in 1374, but we do not know if this was some kind of invention.⁴⁵

At this time, it was considered an act of Buddhist merit to fund public bathhouses for lepers and other karmically impure people, so if Ippen founded a healing sauna, its absence from the *Hijiri-e* is noteworthy.⁴⁶ Perhaps the discomfort lay in portraying Ippen using the sauna himself. A fear of contagion pervades the *Hijiri-e*, which earnestly mentions Ippen's stay in the house of charity and depicts lepers and outcasts among the Ji-shū following Ippen around but never shows them receiving a *fuda*.⁴⁷ We know that Ippen would have done nothing to prevent them from receiving one because he says to his Ji-shū followers in scroll 3 of the *Hijiri-e*:

Distribute your *fuda* regardless of whether people have faith or not, and without discriminating between the pure and the impure.⁴⁸

There is therefore an implication that ritually polluted were receiving *fuda* which is for some reason never actually portrayed in the scroll. If Ippen had founded a sauna, might the lepers have wanted to use it alongside him for a chance, no matter how slim, at being

⁴³ Tachibana, *Ippen shonin zenshu*, 23-4; Kohaku Tateya, "Ji-shū jiin Shōju-ji ni tsuite," p. 3.

⁴⁴ Kurita, *Ippen Shōnin: tabi no shisakusha*, p. 95.

⁴⁵ Kohaku, "Shōju-ji."

⁴⁶ Moerman, "The Buddha and the Bathwater," p. 80.

⁴⁷ Sunagawa, *Hijiri-e kenkyū*, p. 32.

⁴⁸ Tachibana, *Ippen shonin zenshu*, 19, translated in Hirata, *No Abode*, p. xxxv.

cleansed of the untold centuries of karma that created their pollution, and perhaps healed of their worldly illness by the physical presence of his pure and powerful body? Besides Ippen's instructions regarding the *fuda*, we also have his deathbed statement that "among the five aggregates there is no sickness afflicting sentient beings," suggesting that he would not have prevented lepers from touching him.⁴⁹

We arrive, then, at one of the central tensions in depictions of Ippen as a healer: he was surrounded by people socially deemed impure, but he denied their impurity. If impurity was a contagion, he would get it on himself, which Shōkai would obviously reject. Contrariwise, if his *purity* was contagious, activities like distributing *fuda* to lepers, giving out his urine, or sharing a bath or sauna would distribute his purity to others—but depicting such a miraculous act of purification would run contrary to Ippen's own denial of miraculous powers.

It is easy to understand why this would have been a conundrum for Ippen's biographer Shōkai, and even perhaps for Ippen. Any depiction of Ippen that could be read as using his body to heal others could have led to a situation in which his traces, either his body or objects he had touched, could be used to offer or withhold healing from others, and thereby to accumulate personal power and displace the centrality of Amida. Hence the text must either erase such traces, as was perhaps done for the Beppu sauna or the urine distribution, or explicitly deny their meaning, as with the purple clouds, or finally render them ambiguous, as with the "keepsake" footprints and the healing of the Hitachi scoundrel. This strategy seen in the *Hijiri-e* may also explain Ippen's own decision to burn the books in his possession.

In order to ensure that the boundaries of karmic purity are not disturbed, the *Hijiri-e* cannot depict any activity which might imply that someone has changed states from impure to pure, or vice versa. Only at the very end of the final scroll is there an unwritten, but moving and bold, statement about such things. Here, after Ippen's death, we see a leper drown himself alongside four other Ji-shū. The suicidal believers' striking lack of concern for sharing the river with lepers is an affirmation of Ippen's own proclamation: Amida has opened a Pure Land to all, and worldly impurity will not follow one there. Yet this leap of faith is simultaneously a leap into death, and the *Hijiri-e* does not pass over the tragedy of this fact. Consistent with Ippen's teachings, the scroll does not portray the suicides as honorable martyrdoms. Rather, in a moving scene, it shows a group of young monks trying to physically prevent one of their friends from drowning himself. In the absence of Ippen's traces, the problem of whether the other Ji-shū will be afflicted by ritual or social impurity can be resolved only by the sorrowful termination of their worldly existence, and as we reach the very last image in the *Hijiri-e* scroll, this shocking recognition of the impossibility of overcoming worldly pollution and other karmic debts leads us to a depiction of monks throwing themselves at an image of Ippen, against his dying wishes.

⁴⁹ Tachibana, *Ippen shonin zenshu*, 108, translated in Hirota, *No Abode*, p. 35.

5. Conclusion: On the Regulation of Traces

Alongside his declaration that “the absence of traces shall be my traces,” his burning of books, and his request that his body be exposed to the elements without funeral rites, Ippen supposedly requested that his followers not commit suicide after his death. The *Hijiri-e* has him saying that “if your self-attachment has not been exhausted, you must not take your own life. It is rare and difficult to receive an existence in which you encounter the Buddha-way. How lamentable it would be to cast it away in vain!”⁵⁰

Like the association of relics with this-worldly attachment, this message reiterates standard Buddhist doctrine. Yet the *Hijiri-e* depicts that some Ji-shū did end up committing suicide. My reading suggests that among his followers were those who believed less that Amida had promised universal salvation, and more that Ippen’s embodied presence had purified them and readied them for the Pure Land, and that their continued existence after his death could only lead to an accumulation of impurities and karma. The *Hijiri-e* struggles to cope with this seemingly unintended legacy of Ippen’s. We may see that struggle as part of what compelled Shōkai to produce such a gorgeously detailed and realistic work.

Recent scholarship has suggested that the *Hijiri-e* is possibly a response to *Tengu zōshi*, or at least to the elite attitudes towards Ippen that it depicts. Such an explanation explains many mysteries about the text. For example, Abe Yasurō suggests that the *Hijiri-e*’s anomalous discussion of purple clouds and falling flowers, contradicting Ippen’s explicit protest that such phenomena are not necessarily connected to him, became necessary to answer *Tengu zōshi*’s depiction of Ippen and his *tengu* cronies manufacturing these miracles to deceive the public.⁵¹

Sunagawa points out how the *Hijiri-e* spends an extravagant amount of time on Ippen’s prayers at various *kami* shrines, numbering eighteen in total. This does not seem to give us much information about Ippen’s character, but it does effectively refute the charge made in *Tengu zōshi* that Ippen rejected *kami* worship, simultaneously asserting the orthodox nature of such worship by placing the shrines and their *engi* in a sacred landscape. The repetitive depiction of dancing nembutsu in various towns across the country, and *Hijiri-e*’s justification for the practice by reference to Kūya, may also be intended to refute *Tengu zōshi*’s accusation that such behaviors were disruptive and chaotic novelties, the repetition serving to normalize the dancing and reject the elite reflex for embarrassment.⁵²

The ridicule and contempt that *Tengu zōshi* has for Ippen, combined with the extreme amount of resources poured into the high-quality materials and design of the *Hijiri-e*, suggest a Kyoto intellectual world divided against itself in its opinion of Ippen. This does not tell us whether Ippen actually distributed his urine as medicine, a question that may never be resolved. But it does suggest anxieties lying behind both of these scrolls: the *Hijiri-e* suggests an anxiety that Ippen’s legacy of compassion and message

⁵⁰ *Ippen hijiri-e*, scroll 9, translated in Hirata, *No Abode*, p. xlv.

⁵¹ Abe, *Chūsei Nihon no sekaizō*, p. 478.

⁵² Sunagawa, “Jishū hihan.”

of salvation will be tarnished by small-minded detractors, and *Tengu zōshi* suggests a parallel anxiety that new Buddhist movements, accompanied by purple clouds, dancing, and other wild new practices, could displace the stable forms of court Buddhism. Following Ippen's death, the traces of an obscene god-man, a dangerous revolutionary, and a liberatory saint haunted the Kyoto imaginary in the form of these rival scrolls.

In the smoldering embers of this bitter battle over Ippen's legacy, one feels like we have a hint of why Ippen desired so strongly to destroy all traces of himself upon his death. The way in which Ippen would be remembered, as a saint or as a disruptive faith healer, could cause people to doubt the validity or applicability of his approach to Pure Land salvation. To me, there still remains a mystery of how Ippen believed that the way he would be remembered would relate to the security of being reborn. Did Ippen think that his traces were going to have an effect on his karma and his rebirth? Or was his concern purely a compassionate desire for the salvation of unseen others, whose understanding of their salvation in the Pure Land might be diminished by his own followers' misuse of his traces? Perhaps it is the latter, compassionate instinct that shook Ippen's aristocratic followers so deeply that they decided to create the *Hijiri-e*, pouring their souls into an epic work of art that affirms for all time the memory of a man who worked tirelessly for the salvation of all living beings. Yet beneath the *Hijiri-e*'s elaborate, beautiful portrayals of shrines, temples, and dancing nembutsu, there is still an argument being carried out with long-dead interlocutors, a whisper of a trace.

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