

## **The Life of Oda Uraku**

Oda Nagamasu—more commonly known by his tea name, “Uraku”—was born in 1547 in Owari Province (now western Aichi Prefecture). He was the eleventh son of Oda Nobuhide (1511–1549), head of the powerful Oda samurai family that controlled the region. Uraku’s older brother, Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582), later became the first of three great warlords whose campaigns to unify the country culminated in centralized rule under the Tokugawa government. Uraku also associated with the second and third of these unifying warlords, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616).

Despite his ties to such powerful martial figures, Uraku is best remembered as a man of culture more than combat. He studied tea under the most influential tea master in Japanese history, Sen no Rikyū (1522–1591). During the tumultuous decades of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Uraku often used tea gatherings as a setting for brokering peace between warring factions. He eventually retired to the seclusion of a Buddhist temple in Kyoto, where he built his masterpiece, the tea house Jo-an.

### Early Years

Relatively little is known about Uraku’s youth. In 1567, at age 20, he joined his brother Nobunaga in the city of Gifu, which Nobunaga had just conquered. In 1581, Catholic missionaries came to the area and baptized several hundred people. Although no reliable records remain, anecdotal sources claim Uraku was among those baptized, and that he took the baptismal name “João” (Portuguese for “John”), which in Japanese is pronounced “Jo-an.” He would later bestow this name on his tea house.

In 1582, disaster struck. While Uraku and Nobunaga were visiting Honnōji Temple in Kyoto, Nobunaga was betrayed by one of his generals, Akechi Mitsuhide (1528–1582), whose forces surrounded the temple. Rather than be captured, Nobunaga committed suicide. Reportedly, Nobunaga’s eldest son, Oda Nobutada (1557–1582), was wavering over whether to join his father in suicide or to flee. At Uraku’s advice, Nobutada remained and committed ritual suicide, but Uraku himself departed.

### Mediation through Tea Gatherings

Uraku studied under tea master Sen no Rikyū during Rikyū’s tenure as instructor to the Oda household, which lasted until the death of Oda Nobunaga. Uraku became Rikyū’s student again some years later while the tea master was employed by the Toyotomi family. Some records even list Uraku as one of the “Seven Great Disciples” of Rikyū.

Uraku's study of tea played an important role in the political affairs of the time. As part of his wider peacemaking efforts, he attended tea gatherings in the role of mediator at several key points in the latter half of the sixteenth century. In 1585, he negotiated an accord between Nobunaga's former general Toyotomi Hideyoshi and Oda Nobukatsu (1558–1630), Nobunaga's second son and successor. Shortly thereafter, Uraku attended tea gatherings with Hideyoshi and Tokugawa Ieyasu, Hideyoshi's former lieutenant and advisor. Uraku achieved a peace agreement between the two rising warlords in 1586.

### Conflicting Loyalties

When Hideyoshi died in 1598, Tokugawa Ieyasu moved to fill the power vacuum. A struggle began between Ieyasu and Hideyoshi's successors and retainers, and Ieyasu's decisive victory at the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600 secured his position as shogun. Uraku had acted as one of Ieyasu's generals at Sekigahara, and he was awarded sizeable landholdings for his participation.

By 1614, Ieyasu had subdued Hideyoshi's remaining allies, with the exceptions of Hideyoshi's consort, Yodo-dono (1567–1615), and his young heir, Hideyori (1593–1615). The two had encamped at Osaka Castle and had begun recruiting supporters. Uraku, who was Yodo-dono's uncle, repeatedly urged her to seek peace with Ieyasu. Finally, frustrated by the continuing hostilities, Uraku left Osaka in early 1615. That June, Ieyasu attacked the castle, and Yodo-dono and Hideyori committed suicide.

### Retirement

Perhaps discouraged by his experience in Osaka, Uraku retired to Kyoto the same year. In 1617, he negotiated with Kenninji Temple for permission to rebuild one of its dilapidated worship halls and construct a residence in which to retire. He moved into the newly finished complex, called the Shōdenin, in 1618. Uraku died three years later, at age 75, and was buried on the grounds of his residence.

### Uraku's Legacy

The school of tea carried on by Uraku's heirs and followers is known as Uraku-ryū, and it continues to be practiced today. The fifteenth head of the Uraku-ryū school, Oda Nagashige (1918–1992), came to see the construction of Urakuen on March 23, 1972.

For Uraku, the primary concern in tea practice (*chanoyu*) was heartfelt hospitality and the comfort of his guests. Uraku was critical of tea practitioners who copied what great tea masters did without truly understanding it or employing any thought or innovations of their own. Uraku's independence of spirit is evident in the design of Jo-

an, which reflects the teachings of his mentor without being bound by them.