

Preface

In March 2014, I received a message from my close dharma friend in Australia, John Paraskevopoulos. He mentioned that he very much enjoyed the sayings of the 19th-century priest Gōjun Shichiri but remarked what a pity it was that more of his work wasn't available in English. This sparked off a desire in me to supply him with further translations of Master Shichiri's writings. A substantial volume containing his words and deeds—*Shichiri Wajō Genkō Roku* (published in 1912)—had long been sitting on my bookshelf, awaiting this moment.

As I commenced my translation, I soon became fascinated by the Master's deep insight into Jōdo Shinshū (or Shin Buddhism) and by the astute advice he gave to followers. Originally recorded in the pre-modern age, these passages are very much worth listening to even today. The Master's words are not only straightforward expositions of this tradition; they also offer guidance on how to conduct our lives in light of its teachings.

I now have the pleasure of presenting, to well-wishers of the Dharma, one hundred brief accounts of Master Shichiri's wise counsel. My thanks are due to Rev. Paraskevopoulos for the initial suggestion to have me undertake this translation, for the kind help he rendered with polishing the English text and for his valuable assistance with the footnotes.

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2

Mr. Itō from Kyōto once confessed to Master Shichiri: “As you know, I am a busy merchant and must often deal with difficult people. When engaged in business talk, I’m inclined to get angry over trifling matters. Confronted by a hard-bargaining person, I quickly become short-tempered and annoyed. Commercial transactions dominate my mind and often—for no particular reason—I find myself trapped in a state of constant restlessness.

“Such being my daily life, I’m liable to neglect visiting the temple to hear the Dharma. Therefore, I think I’ll give up this tiresome business and return to my home town of Ōmi to become a farmer, where I can devote myself more to the nembutsu⁴ while tilling the soil. What do you think, Master?”

The Master replied to him. “No, do not do so. It’s true that you may be able to hear the Dharma in temples to your heart’s content if you abandon your current profession to become a farmer. However, before long, you’ll soon find yourself no better off than you are now.

“You may not know it but every activity in cultivating the land, with spade and plough, will also incite your blind passions (*bonnō*)⁵ and hinder your

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4. The Name of Amida Buddha as both “the manifestation of great compassion and the saying of this Name, *Namo Amida Butsu*” which “is none other than the Name (the call of Amida) working in persons and awakening shinjin in them. When they realize shinjin, it is expressed spontaneously as the nembutsu ... While there is nothing extraordinary about saying the nembutsu, the realization attached to it, involving one’s whole being, evokes an entirely new universe of meaning.” *Collected Works of Shinran* [hereafter CWS], Vol.2 (Glossary), pp.195-96.
 5. “A comprehensive term descriptive of all the forces, conscious and unconscious, that propel the unenlightened person to think, feel, act and speak – whether in happiness or sorrow – in such a way as to cause uneasiness, frustration, torment and pain (mentally, emotionally, spiritually and even physically) for themselves and others ... When we realize the full implications of this truth about ourselves, we see that the human condition is itself nothing but blind passion. Thus, just to live, or wanting to live, as an unenlightened being is to manifest blind passion at all times, regardless of what we may appear to be. One comes to know this, however, only through the illumination of great compassion. Hence, awakening to one’s own nature is called ‘the wisdom of shinjin’ and the person who realizes it has already been grasped by the Primal Vow.” CWS (Vol.2), p.172.

sincere search for the Dharma. Either way, your gradual alienation from the teachings will be no different.

“So, yes, the more eagerly you engage in your present job, the more of these passions you’ll give rise to. However, while these will likely thwart your hearing of the Dharma, they’ll also act as a spur to have you seek it at the same time.

“For example, when timber logs are sent down a river, they often collide with large rocks and other impediments. They also encounter difficult corners and curves, which can block their smooth passage. But every time logs come up against an obstacle, this serves as an impetus for them to push forward all the more.

“In a peaceful, slow-moving river, logs will not proceed downstream as quickly; yet they will flow quite rapidly in a torrent even when faced with obstructions. Just so, your day-to-day dealings in the frantic world of business give you a better chance of hearing the teachings. Being a farmer in the country, your life may certainly be happier and more peaceful but your inclination to seek joy in the Dharma will be much reduced.”

Master Shichiri then related the following story to Mr. Itō: “In the past, a man named Kikai was under the spiritual instruction of Myōe Shōnin of Togano-o.⁶ One day, he told the Shōnin: ‘I cannot practice as I wish when living with many people. So I think I’ll leave this place and practice alone deep in the mountains without any fellow way-farers.’

“Myōe Shōnin then replied: ‘It is true that you can practice more easily when living alone in a quiet place. But this will not last very long. As a poem says:

6. Myōe Shōnin (1173–1232) was a master of the Kego school in the Kamakura period.

*When I retreat to the mountains with a wish not to hear even the
sound of waves,
The wind wafting over the pine trees brings an annoyance in disguise.*

“The Shōnin continued: ‘Before long, the sound of ripples in a stream or the wind blowing over pine trees will serve, indirectly, to provoke troublesome passions. Accordingly, you won’t be able to follow the Dharma as you wish. It’s surely the case that if you live with fellow disciples, many more disturbances will arise for your practice. Nevertheless, these upheavals will give you an incentive not to lag behind others and to succeed in your endeavors quickly. If you are alone, you’ll tend to become complacent. I advise you not to flee into the mountains.’

“In spite of this earnest advice, Kikai went away and confined himself to a mountain. Sure enough, he did not show any sign of progress and, after a while, began to backslide in his practice. Seeing this, he apologized and went back to the Shōnin.

“What do you think of this story?” asked Master Shichiri.

Deeply impressed by what he had heard, Mr. Itō returned to his business and resumed recitation of the nembutsu as before.

7

The Master once related the following story: “One day, on my way to Kyōto, I went to Moji and stayed at a hotel where I waited for a boat departure. My accommodation was upstairs. In the next room was a merchant who was intently reckoning on an abacus. Before long, a servant of the lodging house told us that the departure time would come around soon. The merchant promptly packed his account books and abacus in a wicker trunk and got on board with the other passengers.

“When the boat set sail, he took out those items and resumed his work. Being his roommate, I thought to myself: What wonderful timing! If he had not stopped working when the departure time was announced, he would have missed the boat. How admirable it is that, having ceased his work on time and boarded the vessel, he was able to resume his duties once again!

“When I urge people to listen to the teachings, they often say ‘I am busy with my work’ or ‘I am too young to listen to the Dharma’. They do not appreciate that the winds of impermanence can suddenly blow at any moment. Why do they not learn from this merchant? Why don’t they first get on board the ship that is the Vow of Great Compassion and then busy themselves with secular work after that?”

The Master said: “Those who are worried about shinjin are probably comparing their faith to the Buddha’s wisdom of salvation as something that stands opposed to them. Salvation, which lies in the hands of the Other, works by taking the initiative in approaching you. It takes effect when true Faith arises and all your doubts are cleared. To be troubled by whether or not it’s firmly established, while you keep Amida’s working at arm’s length, is like placing your shinjin over against the Buddha’s compassion. This can only lead to confusion.”