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Three Buddhist Tales

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BUDDHIST PUBLICATION SOCIETY

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The Old Weaver

From the Tibetan *Tang'an*
retold by Dr. H. Hecker

Wissen und Wandel XV, 1

In the country of Tibet there once lived an old weaver who had many sons. Day-in and day-out he worked away at his weaving-loom and never once gave a thought to the meaning of his life, nor to life in general. Even though he was concerned only with superficialities, now and then it did occur to him that he could see no end of his labour. Every day he began his work afresh, and everyday he carried on spinning. During the course of his life he had grown quite rich, and to his many sons he had given wives of good families, so that his clan flourished with many children and grandchildren.

One day the weaver's beloved wife died, and when at the age of eighty-nine he became too feeble to prepare his own food, his many daughters-in-law prepared his meals in turn. When in his frailty the old man came tottering along to his children's homes, other people (as well as his children and their servants) used to laugh at him and ridicule him as the

rich old man to whom all his money was no longer of any use. Then his daughters-in-law felt it unpleasant and troublesome when the old man called at their houses; it spoiled their joy of life and harmed the family's good reputation. At last they decided to build a small hut of reeds in one of their gardens for the old weaver, where he could live quietly, while they continued to send him his meals in turn. They all found this solution quite reasonable, and soon the old man moved into his little hut in the garden of his eldest son.

Not long after this, a monk came to the son's house and was received with rich alms-food as well as an invitation to spend the night. The monk replied that his vows did not allow him to spend the night with lay-people in the house, but that he could stay in the garden. When the old weaver saw the lights of the lamps coming into the garden, he came out of his little hut to inquire who had arrived, and the visitor told him that he was a Buddhist monk. When the monk in return asked the old man who he was, the weaver told him: "O venerable sir, I am the father of all these many children here, whom I brought up and fed and for whom I selected suitable wives. Once I was the owner and master of all these large properties, but now I am laughed at by my family, and my daughters-in-law are ashamed of my old-age and frailty. They have hidden

me away in this garden where they may not see me, and I live here quite alone." While he spoke thus the old man's tears flowed.

The monk felt great pity for him and said: "If you are weeping so bitterly about this minor misfortune, how much more will you moan and lament if you fall into an unhappy rebirth. All your life you have been concerned only with superficial and material things, and you have not laid up the more precious treasures of the mind. You are paying for that bitterly now, and after death you will turn around for a long time in the cycle of rebirths. Your present unhappiness is due to your own actions, and yet you unjustly blame your children."

The old man sighed: "O yea, venerable sir, alas, you are quite right. When I was young and had the chance to purify my mind, I failed to do so; and now that I am old and need so much to feel a little satisfaction and joy, I am unable to work for it. O, what I need is a remedy against old-age and death!"

The monk replied: "I know that remedy; I can get it for you."

The old man was startled, and when he asked for instruction the monk advised him to develop meditation on the transiency of all sensuous existence and on its unsatisfactory and void nature. The old

man listened very carefully and soon grasped the meaning of it, so that although his teacher left on the following morning he was able to apply himself diligently thereafter in the meditations that had been explained to him. All of the time that hitherto he had spent in sleeping and dreaming and bewailing his fate, he now used to his advantage. He no longer felt bitter and sad when his daughters-in-law dropped the hint that he was nothing but a useless old man whom they all had to feed. He accepted their words quietly and forgave them in his heart. For twelve years he devoted himself to meditation in the garden hut and accumulated a store of virtue and merit that was incomparably larger than his wealth in money and property; but because to his daughters-in-law these spiritual things were quite foreign, they failed to notice any change in him.

One day the families of the old man celebrated a great festival, and only late at night did one of his daughters-in-law remember that they had not taken any food to him. Feeling great remorse, she went into the garden with some food, and was very surprised to find the little hut ablaze with light. Wondering what it could be, she approached, and through the window saw a group of fifteen deities, shining in celestial glory, waiting upon the old man with great respect. Seeing this, she at once ran back to the house to fetch

the others, but from what she told them they only gathered that the old man must be dead. When they all came to the garden and saw the deities they were very frightened and quickly turned back to the house, where they discussed the matter and came to the conclusion that it must have been ghosts.

Next morning, however, when they again went into the garden, they found to their surprise that the old man was quite hale and hearty, and that his features glowed and radiated an inner serenity. He did not tell them of his inner experiences since he lacked the ability to instruct others, but from now on many people who had heard of that wondrous happening came to see him, for even just the sight of him was enough to move and benefit them all. He became known as the "Guru Tantri," and many of his visitors were encouraged to return again to their religion and were later reborn in heavenly worlds. The old man, who had once appeared quite useless and a burden to everyone, thus became the spiritual guide of the whole district. At the age of more than a hundred years the old weaver finally passed away, and his family, together with the whole township mourned him for many days.

Of Dogs and Men

As told by James Allen
in *Die Illusion des Ich* (*Buddhistische Warte I. I*)

(re-translation from the German)

Once there were several dogs who all had the desire to become humans. They met in conclave to deliberate on whether there were any methods whereby they could be reborn as humans and become men. They discussed man's enormous superiority over themselves, his great beauty, his erect walk, his wondrous freedom, his powerful influence, his "eternal" life and his "eternal" youthfulness ("because," they said, "while we get old and die, man does not change"). The great dignity and wisdom of man were also mentioned. Finally, when they had all discussed their various views and opinions, one dog who had kept silent and who was more sagacious and noble than the others, rose to speak.

"All these speculations are in vain," he said, "so long as we continue to live and behave like dogs. If we wish to become humans we must begin by honestly wishing to cease being dogs. As little as we can

become men while still preserving the bodily shape of dogs, so also we cannot expect to be humans while still clinging to our dog-like natures. First we must give up our animal habits and pleasures, and renounce all those tendencies that make us what we are now—namely, dogs; then we must cultivate those higher trends that make men to be real human beings. If we diligently strive to make progress, then the best in us will be gradually transformed into a higher nature. We shall become men only by ceasing to be dogs. This can never happen if we continue to be anxiously concerned about our existence as dogs, obstinately cling to all the lusts and pleasures of our dog-like nature, nor if we recoil from the thought that we must stop carrying on being dogs. This is a method which I have found, not by speculation, but by experience. I have practised these things that I have spoken about myself, and having practised these things that I have spoken about myself, and having understood what the nature of human beings is, I shall no longer be reborn as a dog."

After this speech there was much noise and confusion among the assembled dogs, for they all said that what they had heard was tantamount to an entire extinction of dog-selfhood and of the very nature of dog-hood. They argued that this very life consisted of just this distinct and clearly-marked dog-personality,

and that their immortality depended upon the survival of this very personality. Thus the teachings to which they had now listened, namely that the only way to acquire a human nature was by the cessation of their dog-nature—that these teachings must be false as they were in conflict with their ideas of an eternal and abiding personal self-hood (which for them was the very foundation of all existence and endeavour).

"Yes," they said, "even though we wish for the higher state of human beings, it is absurd and contrary to our nature to stop being dogs. We can accept only such a teaching as true that leads us to man-hood while allowing us to preserve our dog-personalities."

Thus it is also with us humans who, although we seek after truth and aspire to a higher and nobler state, still continue to recoil from changing even a little part of our personalities, to say nothing about the final sacrifice of self. We wish to preserve our feverish craving and our petty self-centred natures because we believe in an eternal survival of our personalities and are frightened to lose them. Yet it is only because of this illusion of self-hood that the endless process of birth and death continues. Even the teacher of Christendom has said: "He who wishes to preserve his life must lose it."

This Mother and This Son

From *The Udumbara: Tales of Buddhist Japan*
by Kosho Yamamoto, CIIB Press, Tokyo

I

In the prefecture of Nara, in the south-western corner of Yamato Plain, there is a village called Taima. Here, 942 A.D., the venerable master Genshin [1] was born.

His father was Urabe-Masachika. He died when Genshin was only seven years old. It was on the wish of his father that Genshin became a priest.

Already as a boy, Genshin was very clever. Once a priest was so struck by the boy's sharp wit that he went to his mother and begged her to entrust the boy to him so that he could take him to Mount Hiei, the then headquarters of Japanese Buddhism, and there to put him under the care of Priest Ryogen. His mother was glad because it was a good opportunity to make good the wish of her late husband whose last will it

had been that the boy should be brought up as a priest.

II

On parting the mother gave the boy a new set of clothes. She also gave him a copy of the *Amidakyo* ,telling him that this was a token from his father. Then she said that she would send for him when he had grown up to be a truly holy man, and that otherwise, this was their last meeting.

The boy was taken to Mount Hiei and was put under the care of Ryogen. He was then thirteen years old. Ryogen saw that the boy was no ordinary person and he did his best to help him in his Buddhist studies. Ryogen gave him a priestly name and henceforth the boy was called “Genshin,” “gen” being part of Ryogen’s name.

In the days of Emperor Murakami, in the tenth year of Tensyaku, young Genshin gave in the presence of the Mikado a lecture on Shosañjodokyo, a translation of the Amidakyo under a different title. His learning and eloquence were so wonderful that the Emperor gave him a roll of silken cloth as a token of appreciation.

Glad at this rare honour, the boy sent this imperial gift to his mother, thinking that she would be very glad. And how would she not be glad when no word had come from the boy since he left home three years ago? But she was no ordinary woman to be taken in by anything glaring. She sent the silken cloth back to him, along with a letter, which read:

> To the venerable Genshin,
>
> Since you went up to Mount Hiei, glad thoughts have ever been visiting me. And I thought you were growing up as a holy man. But woe is it that you have been closely associating yourself with the imperial quarters, that you have been going up in status, that the colours of your robe have been changing, that you have been giving lectures to the Mikado, receiving thereby presents and becoming a priest busy with worldly fame and gain …
>
> All these are not acts of one who has renounced the world, and you are sure to repeat lives again and again. One ought to remember that one is blessed with the rarest of the teachings and thus can be saved of an after-life. But I regret that you are drowned in material fame. This is the silliest thing, an act most regrettable. To take anything like that as

honour is nothing but base delusion. What worth is there in it to be well known by the people of this world of dreams? Do your best and ever, with an unending effort, awake in Bodhi! …

And are you not one who has shaven off your hair, who has put on the black robe, and left home, abandoning all, so as to live as a sage in the mountains? …

And what do you mean to do with the robe that has been given to you? Even sages whose speech is set aright and whose deeds are in accord with their speech, are said to burn in hell if they cherished possessions. There is nothing in it to lead one to the Pure Land, but to the Three Evil Realms. And nothing goes beyond this. As I have no mind to glance at it, I return this to the honoured priest.

Your Mother

Then Genshin awoke from his dreams. He retired deep into Yokawa on Mount Hiei, to the Shuryogon-in Temple, there to escape from worldly life and earnestly seek the Way. He is said to have read the Tripiṭaka five times in his life. He became the most honoured, the most learned and virtuous of the whole

Hiei Mountain.

III

At the age of forty-two, when news came that his mother was on her death-bed, he for the first time went back to his native place and saw his mother. His first question was:

> "Can you say the *Nembutsu*, dear mother?"
>
> "Thank you! … Please do not forget the *Nembutsu* … But my physical strength is gone and I cannot say it."

Thus the mother and her son met after thirty years, though they lived not far from each other.

The venerable Genshin told her all about the virtues of Nembutsu and the adornments of the Pure Land. Her room was swept and cleaned, and washed with perfumed water. The statue of Amita Buddha was set up. He changed his mother's clothing. He then sat and recited the Nembutsu, beating the kei, a metal drum used in Buddhist music which gives a sound similar to a cymbal. His mother passed peacefully away, saying the Nembutsu some three hundred times.

Genshin said:

> It was my mother who made me perfect in practise; and it was I who had enabled my mother to attain the end well. This mother and this son, each becoming a Teacher of the Way! This could but be the happy fruit of past karma.

In the 2nd year of Eikan, i.e. 984, in the month of November, Genshin took up his pen and began to write his famous *Ojoyoshu* and finished it in the next year.

Notes

1. Editor's Note: Genshin (942–1017), though ordained in the Tendai school, became one of the great masters of the Pure Land School. His book *Ojoyoshu* (3 vols.), a comprehensive summary of the Pure Land (Jodo) faith, had also a great influence on Japanese literature and art, and became the turning point in Honen's life. **[Back]**

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