

On Buddhism:

From an Oral History Interview by Katō Mizuho with Ikegami Hiroko (2007)

Katō: [. . .] Next, we would like to ask you about your monkhood. How did you become interested in Esoteric Buddhism?

Shiraga: I read many books on Sanskrit characters [*bonji*] and Buddhist hand gestures [S: *mudrā*]. Around that time [in the early 1960s], I walked around with a rifle on my shoulder, though with no intention of hunting birds or anything like that, just to walk around. I was conscripted during the war, and before that I was trained to use a gun in compulsory military drills at middle school, so the gun was familiar to me. Besides, I liked guns and knives. I thought them very masculine [*otoko-rashii*]. I wanted to possess them. I once went to Tokyo to purchase an American-made quick-firing gun, the type which ejects cartridges upon shooting. A specialty store in Ichigaya in Tokyo dealt in guns related to the Occupation forces. I bought this gun there and enjoyed looking at it and touching it. I soon wanted to go hunting with it, and joined a local hunting club in Amagasaki [where I resided]. The most heroic is wild boar hunting. From Amagasaki, you can go northward to Nose [in Osaka] or Kumogahata in Kyoto's suburb. You wait for a boar to come out. I am like, "This rifle is very good, I will surely shoot the boar when it comes out." However, no boar came out. [Laughs] They came out to other hunters in the group, but not to me. No matter how many excursions I made. One of the purposes of boar hunting was to use one's hide in my work. In fact, I made *Wild Boar Hunting I*, a very large work of 200 *gō* [longer edges being approximately 260 cm wide], and *Wild Boar Hunting II* [both in 1963]. I wanted to make them with boars I shot, but I couldn't, so I went to a butcher that offered both boar meat and hides in the Nihonbashi section of Osaka, where I bought these hides. In my hunting trips, I saw many stone monuments called *itabi* [literally "plank monuments"] in Nose. They're flat stone slabs on which Sanskrit characters are carved in an extremely forceful style. There is a thirteen-story pagoda on Nakanoshima in the Uji River [south of Kyoto]. Sanskrit characters are carved on that, too. I was very attracted to these

Sanskrit carvings. I knew a little bit about them from books, but I began to study the meaning of these characters [which are related to Esoteric Buddhism]. I bought some books at Kichūdō, a Buddhist bookseller in Kyoto. But, just reading these books didn't help me to understand Esoteric Buddhism at all. [Laughs] I thought of asking somebody, and consulted my photographer friend. He happened to have an uncle who was a head monk of a temple, Tōkōji. I contacted this uncle through his introduction. However, the uncle called me up to tell me, "Our temple's main deity is Amida [and the temple is in the Pure Land sect]. We have nothing to do with Esoteric Buddhism. However, I will introduce you to somebody conversant with that." The person I thus got in contact with was the *zasu* [the Tendai sect's supreme head monk]. This is how I became a monk, through my interest in Esoteric Buddhism. I became a monk without feeling a *mujōkan* [a view of life as something transient and empty]. [Laughs] I should probably say I was made to become a monk or I happened to become a monk.

Katō: You received the monk name Sodō [literally, "Simple Path"] [in May 1971 at Enryakuji on Mount Hiei, the head temple of the Tendai sect, in northeastern Kyoto]. Was this given by Yamada Etai holding the rank of *dai-sōjō* [great priest]?

Shiraga: That is correct. Around that time, upon entering monkhood, you would receive a letter called a *dochō*. I still keep mine. It certifies that my monk name is Sodō and I am a disciple of Reverend Sugawara of Nikkō, who was then the Tendai supreme head monk. It is the proof that I became a monk, telling me, "Now that you are a monk, practice hard."

Katō: From then onward, you underwent a series of austerities. You first did "four-part *parayoga*" [*shido kegyō*].

Shiraga: This *parayoga* [preparatory ascetic training] is most important. You can do *shōgyō* [literally "correct practices"] by commuting to Mount Hiei,

because it has no set time schedule. In *shōgyō*, you study how to read various sutras and the monk's manners and behavior. The manners are very important in monkhood—beginning with how to stand and be seated. The basic act is “throwing oneself to the ground and worship” [*tōchi reihai*], which consists of standing up, going forward, and worshipping like this [kneeling down and touching the floor with the forehead]. During the *parayoga*, you are made to do hundreds of *tōchi reihai*. It's a killer for everybody. In my case, the situation was a little different: I did it all by myself, with a Mr. Yamashita as my overseer. Three times a day, I was made to do *tōchi reihai* hundreds of times. Perhaps three hundred of them, at one time. So a daily total of nine hundred. You have to do it for a week. After a week, your knees are busted. My [right] knee was swollen so badly that the water [collecting under the kneecap] was about to burst. My [left] knee was less damaged. Eventually, the water broke. It's healed now, but it hurt so much when the water broke. Until the water broke, it didn't hurt so much. After the week of *tōchi reihai*, you move on to the next practice, called “eighteen-time practice” [*jūhachido kegyō*], which will take another week, followed by a week each of the Womb World [*Taizōkai*] and the Diamond World [*Kongōkai*; combined, the two worlds represent the Esoteric cosmology]. The fifth and last week is devoted to the practice of “fire burning” [*goma gyō*]. I began in late April, spent the whole month of May, and completed the entire course on June 5. 35 days in total. By then, it was hot. Since we did *goma*-burning in a closed room, it became really hot. I endured it, thinking it was part of austerity.

Katō: Are these austerities known for hardship?

Shiraga: Yes. Mount Hiei's austerities involve sleep deprivation. You have very little sleeping time, because you can memorize better, remember better what you study. Only three hours of sleep was allowed. Those studying the teachings of the precepts [*kaihō*] also sleep very little. Little sleep makes it go smoothly and allows you to quickly memorize whatever you

need to memorize. That's the reason. But it's hard for those having to do it. [*Laughs*] Three hours of sleep a day! You review and prepare for lessons, and it's already 11 at night, when it's difficult. Then you will have to get up at 2 in the morning. If you can go to bed at 9:30 or 10, you are doing relatively well, in fact. I frequently slept only two hours or less. Overseers also must stay up with their charges. So it should have been hard for Mr. Yamashita, too, especially because he had a slight cold then. Of course, he got better. But I think it was a good thing I went through these austerities.

Katō: How?

Shiraga: Above all, my memory improved. My wife observed, “You don't forget things nowadays. You remember something you don't have to remember.” [*Laughs*] I forget proper names. Like in my last interview, I couldn't remember the name of Dubuffet. However, I remember the events very clearly. Everybody says I remember the past very well. My wife thinks I remember daily events, too.

Katō: Indeed, you remember very well. Next step was the initiation rite of “platform-entering and lustration” [*nyūdan kanjō*]. What is it like?

Shiraga: A graduation exam for Esoteric Buddhism. Candidates for preceptors [J: *ajari*; S: *ācārya*] who open the platform [*kaidan*] are solicited nationwide, from among those at the level of deputy to chief temple monks. There usually are three or so preceptors, divided into two groups, under which five or six, sometimes as few as three, are placed for the rite. They spend two days performing the prescribed rituals. The most important is “connection-making initiation” [*kechien kanjō*], which uses a “mandala for laying out” [*shiki-mandara*]. Usually, the Womb World mandala is used. Depicted in the center of this mandala is Dainich Nyorai [S: Mahāvairocana; Esoteric Buddhism's supreme deity], who is surrounded by Four Buddhas and various Bodhisattvas. An initiate is blindfolded

and drops a “flower” [*hana*] made of five leaves of Japanese anise [J: *shikimi*; *Illicium religiosum*], whose stems are tied by red and white threads, around the center of the mandala. A deity on which the flower falls is “connected” to the initiate, although no matter where it falls, they chant, “Dainichi Nyoraaaaai.” I could not tell which deity the flower hit, but the preceptors would anyway chant, “Dainichi Nyoraaaaai.” After I was done, I saw the next initiate take his turn. There were seven people there. However, he was standing in front of me, so I could not see where his flower fell. [Laughs] The moment the flower was dropped, they chanted, “Dainichi Nyoraaaaai.” It was so funny. [Laughs] But I would be scolded if I had really laughed, so I couldn’t laugh. It was hard not to laugh. At any rate, this connection-making rite is the most important. Even though the whole proceedings are called the “platform entering” initiation, it’s all about making a connection.

Katō: After that, you received a *kōgaku ryūgi*. Is it the most important stage?

Shiraga: Yes. In the Tendai sect, you cannot be made a monk without it. The occasion comes once every five years. The Lotus Rite [*Hokke daie*] is held for five days (I believe) from October 1, during which the *kōgaku ryūgi* [a kind of viva voce] is held. The programs of the Lotus Rite were going on simultaneously, on their own timetable. However, the final viva voce went on, with some participants working through midnight. Since I was a disciple under a Mount Hiei monk, they let me do mine relatively early, at 10 in the morning. However, even though it was daytime, I was told to think of it as nighttime. Placed before me was a mountain-shaped crest [gesturing a mountain with his hands]—this is the crest of [Sensō Shrine on the ground] of the temple Sensōji in Tokyo. I don’t know if it’s Mount Hiei’s crest. This crest was a decoration on a paper lantern, which was lit up even though it was daytime. A sexton who held this lantern led me though to an entrance called *risshaguchi*, where the sexton remained with the lantern. I was wearing a pair of

high-platform wood sandals [*koppori*], but I hung from the doorframe and became barefooted. Then, I heard a sound from inside, the door opened, and I jumped into the room. The sexton with the lantern threw my sandals in. It was pitch dark inside. As my eyes were not used to the darkness, I was unable to find my sandals, and I could not walk without them. A couple of young bonzes waiting there lit a handheld candle and I found my sandals. Putting them on, I uttered my monk name, Sodō. With this as a cue, three high-ranked monks received me. I followed them to the statue of the main deity, dragging my feet with my sandals. After I worshipped it, I noticed a “title” [*hyōdai*] placed there. It’s the title of a question that I had to answer that day. Since the question was predetermined and I was made to practice in advance, I knew it already. I then proceeded to a platform called *hachikōdan*, placed at the height of two meters. I took out my *hyōbyaku* [the text of “ritual confession” to be delivered to the deity] and started reading. However, it’s too dark to see. [Laughs] But as I had practiced and practiced, I knew it by heart. Now, you have to recite it in a distinct manner. The problem was, if you screw up one pitch, you won’t be able to go forward. Suppose you begin as “Aaaai doooo” [I do]. If you have to go higher in the following phrase, you cannot go too high with “doooo.” [Laughs, while demonstrating the out of pitch sound] And there were many turns like that. So you begin as “I do think of the Lotus Rite,” which is supposed to be followed by “And *kōgakuuuu ryūgiiii*,” but if you go very high here, you won’t be able to continue. There are so many like this, indeed. When I had seen others doing it, I anticipated, “Oh, it will go high next,” and voila, it went very high with “And *kōgakuuuu ryūgiiii*.” [Laughs] You have to do it very low with “And *kōgakuuuu ryūgiiii*, whose great feat iiiis.” But if you go very high with “And *kōgakuuuu ryūgiiii*, whose great feat iiiis,” you won’t be able to continue. [Laughs] You cannot go lower so quickly. This will be the basis of a mark you receive, top/middle/bottom. At the very end, you ring the bell, and it’s over. You get your score immediately. If you do well, you will get a fan.

However, they don't give a fan to *issan* [literally "on the one mountain"] who are related to Mount Hiei. [Laughs]

Katō: Do you have to make a good mark to pass it?

Shiraga: No, everybody will pass, no matter how poorly you may perform. You used to have to "come back" after five years, if you did badly. However, nowadays, the sect needs to expedite the process, because applicants come not only from Japan but also Hawaii and the West Coast of the United States. It cannot afford to not pass them. When I did mine, I don't know how many, but there were a considerable number of applicants who underwent it over the five-day period. I have a photograph. Over the course of five days, usually several people at one time do it. You also have three days of practice [prior to that]. During these eight days, six of us sleep in one room. They could not have an *issan*-only room, so one person was a Tokyoite. It was fun but also hard. [Laughs]

Katō: Sounds like an austere experience.

Shiraga: But without passing it, you cannot wear this white "head covering" [*bōshi*]. The supreme head monk can wear it on his head. Monks in the next highest rank, *ikō*, wear it with their ears exposed. All others may wrap it around their necks, not allowed to put it on their heads. Even though it is called "head covering," all others wear it as a scarf. I only came to understand there were so many protocols through my austerities.

Katō: While training, did you paint?

Shiraga: No, I couldn't. I never thought of painting, of course during the *parayoga*, but also when I spent a week to take the final viva voce and the two days I stayed to receive the "platform-entering initiation." A solo exhibition, *Drawings of the Lotus Sutra* [1974], was already on my schedule. I thought about it hard, but I couldn't decide when to start working on it.

After coming back from the *parayoga*, my wife said to me, "You are not normal. Your feet look like they're just 'treading,' No power at all. I wonder why." It occurred to her, "Maybe because you haven't drunk." Indeed, I hadn't drunk for more than ten months: I stopped drinking seven months prior to the four-part *parayoga*, one month while I was at Mount Hiei, and two months afterward. She suggested, "Perhaps you'd better drink." So I drank and after three days, I was right back where I started. [Laughs] I thought, "How about that!" [Laughs] Over those three days, the amount I could drink increased, too. I still drink, too. No sign of drinking any less. Drinking is with me for life.

Katō: Did your work change after your training?

Shiraga: It did. First of all, it became possible for me to draw circles. And, everybody complimented, "Your painting becomes clearer" and "Many of your paintings were very bloody. But they now feel so refreshing, they become very clean." Gutai's leader, Yoshihara Jirō, had already passed away, but, for example, a 1972 painting entitled *Tōhō Jōruri Sekai* [Pure Land of Blue Gem in the East] is so clear. An increasing number were like this.

Katō: How about your attitude when you actually paint?

Shiraga: I am not so conscious about it. My painting method doesn't work if I become conscious of it. All I think is to make a full expression of the state I am in at the time. So the state of mind is revealed in a straightforward way. Then, I gradually returned to the way I had been. I quit painting circles and returned to this type of action painting (foot painting). As I mentioned before, the president of Tokyo Gallery [Yamamoto Takashi] told me, "This [foot painting] is better, we can do a solo exhibition." When I asked him, "How about circles?" he demurred, "Ah, well . . ." [Laughs]

Katō: After the austerities, you have made it a habit to chant sutras before you paint.

Shiraga: Yes, Fudō [S: Acala] is enshrined [in my studio]. Seated before it, I recite Fudō's "true words" [*shingon*], after chanting a sutra—the entire Heart Sutra. If the recitation is too long, I will be too tired to paint, so I recite the Heart Sutra and the true words seven times, and I begin painting.

Katō: Is it necessary?

Shiraga: I feel uneasy without it, I don't feel like painting. After this chanting practice, I feel at ease, I feel I can "entrust it to Fudō." I think this is what the true *tarikihongan* [achieving the original vow by relying on others' power] means. My family belongs to the Hokke sect and today we commemorated the anniversary of my mother's death, with a monk performing a ritual. The Lotus Sutra [Hokekyō; the sect's primary sutra] embraces the idea of *jirikihongan* [achieving the original vow by relying on oneself]. The faith in Amida, as well as the Pure Land sect [*Jōdoshū*] and the True Pure Land sect [*Jōdo shinshū*] center on *tarikihongan*, while Zen is *jirikihongan*. The Nichiren sect, which also uses the Lotus Sutra, very strongly follows the line of this self-reliance. While studying Esoteric Buddhism, what I took most to my heart is that I can act without showing my own will when I rely on and entrust myself to the primary deity, i.e., Dainichi Nyorai or Fudō Myōō. At first, I found it strange, because I had imagined that Esoteric Buddhism was about doing it yourself and creating your path. Yet, it was totally different. You have to entrust yourself to Dainichi, follow what he commands, and act accordingly. It was completely opposite to what I had imagined.

Katō: Before the austerities, didn't you recite a sutra before painting?

Shiraga: Yes, sort of, gradually. [. . .] After I took the *parayoga* and the final *viva voce*, I felt settled down. I have since studied the Tendai teachings again and now understand better. The world of religion is difficult, including the protocols. You have to study

how to meet with high-ranked monks. Today a *shōnin* (holy priest) came to my mother's commemoration, and he noticed the way I attended him. In fact, he asked me a long while ago, "I heard you trained at Mount Hiei," to which I answered, "Yes. Don't you think it's great?" He even wrote about me in the Hokke sect's newsletter. He said, "Any sect would do, if you want to be a Buddhist. If you want to do it seriously, you do it seriously anywhere. That's the way Buddhism works. However, please don't forget the faith in our sect." My answer: "Yes, I understand." [*Laughs*] [. . .]

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