

weeping, before an altar.

This reached the ears of the abbot, who revered Ninkai all the more and began to want his company all the time. The desperate Ninkai ran off, married a local official's daughter some distance away, and even gave up carrying his rosary. But he only longed for enlightenment the more.

A county magistrate who noticed Ninkai became deeply attached to him. For some time he and his wife accompanied Ninkai everywhere and prepared his food, clothing, and bath. They did so, as they told Ninkai himself, out of pure reverence for his sanctity. "We have only one concern," they confessed. "How can we make sure to be with you when you pass away?" Ninkai reassured them. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll be with you." Then he went his way.

Years later, at nightfall on a snowy winter day, Ninkai came to their house. They greeted him gladly, excused their servants, and brought him food themselves. Then he took a bath and lay down.

The next morning the couple rose early. As they were preparing breakfast a marvelous fragrance from Ninkai's room filled the whole house. They decided he must be burning some rare incense. He had said he wanted to leave early, but it was light by now and he still was not up. When the morning gruel was ready they asked a disciple to let him know. The disciple refused. "My master has quite a temper," he said, "and if I bother him he'll only beat me. I'm sure he'll be up any moment."

By sunrise the couple were worried enough to call Ninkai through the door. There was no answer. When they entered they found him seated facing the west with his palms together in prayer. He was dead. Deeply stirred, they prostrated themselves with Ninkai's disciples before the husk of the saint. At dawn they had smelled the perfume of Amida's welcome to Ninkai's soul. Ninkai had known when he would die and had kept his promise to his friends.

213.

THE JELLYFISH'S BONES

The renowned monk Zōga was born in Kyoto, but his parents soon moved to the East. They built for the journey a sort of palanquin which they mounted on a horse, and installed in it a wet nurse with their little son in her arms. Unfortunately, it was such a long way that the wet nurse fell asleep and dropped the baby. Little Zōga tumbled to the ground.

Nearly a mile further on, the wet nurse woke up and realized the baby must have fallen out, though goodness knows where. The news drove Zōga's parents wild. They ranted and raved about how all the passing horses, oxen, and people must have trampled him to death, but they turned back anyway since they still wanted his poor body. They found the baby on his back in the middle of the narrow trail, smiling happily. There was not a spot of mud or a wet patch on him.

It was a miracle. That night Zōga's parents had a dream. A sumptuous couch spread with a costly coverlet rode on an expanse of mud, and on it lay little Zōga. Four exquisite boys, one at each corner of the couch, chanted in the language of the scriptures:

*This child is born from the Buddha's mouth,
wherefore we keep him from all harm.*

Now Zōga's parents knew their son was unusual, and they raised him tenderly.

When he was five, little Zōga announced that he would soon be going to master the Lotus Sutra on Mount Hiei. His parents thought him much too young to be saying things like that and feared some spirit might be talking through him. But soon his mother dreamed that even as she nursed her boy he grew into a mature monk with a sutra scroll in his hand; and beside him stood another monk who explained that it was her son's destiny to enter religion. Zōga's parents stopped opposing their son's plan and were happy about it instead.

When he was eleven, Zōga found a distinguished master on Mount Hiei. After a few years everyone recognized his piety and learning. He caused quite a stir, though, when he came back starked naked from the Ise Shrine, having been inspired by a dream (a voice told him, "Forget the body!") to take off all his clothes and pass them out to the beggars. People thought he was mad, and

though his master more or less understood, he felt obliged to remind Zōga that the wish to transcend worldly ambition did not necessarily exempt him from behaving normally. Another time, when his master had just been promoted to the highest ecclesiastical rank, Zōga joined the triumphal procession mounted on a bony old ox, with a dried salmon at his waist instead of a sword.

Respectability and success really meant nothing to Zōga, who wanted above all a quieter place to live. He chose Tōnomine in the hills south of Nara. When the abbot refused him leave to go, he quickly changed the abbot's mind. He stopped sending a servant to fetch his meals but instead came with a blackened and filthy sort of box to collect them himself. Then he would squat by the path with the workmen, pick up a couple of twigs for chopsticks, and share out his dinner as he ate. People decided he was crazy and the abbot was glad enough to let him go.

Zōga found the top of the mountain at Tōnomine too thick with the demons that hinder enlightenment and instead built a hut at an inconspicuous spot in the valley. Alas, he was so revered by now that the emperor insisted on naming him to his personal staff of healers, and naturally other great nobles demanded his services as well. Zōga generally ignored these calls, but when he did go he behaved like a madman and got out of the Capital as fast as he could.

There was, for example, the empress's ordination. Planning to retire into the religious life, the Sanjō Empress invited Zōga to preside at the ceremony. Her messenger thought this a fine idea, since so holy a man would no doubt make the empress into a properly worthy nun.

Zōga's disciples assumed their master would fly into a rage and perhaps even beat the messenger, but he did nothing of the kind. He accompanied the messenger back to the empress's palace without a murmur.

All sorts of great nobles and monks had gathered for the rite. There was even someone to represent the emperor. They all noted Zōga's fierce eyes and impressive bearing, but thought he seemed a little unwell.

Zōga went right up to the empress's curtains and started the ceremony. At the appropriate moment the empress put her long,

beautiful hair out through the curtains and Zōga, in the gesture which above all divides the worldly from the religious life, cut it off. Within the curtains the empress's ladies wept as though their hearts would break.

Having done his bit Zōga tidied up, then addressed the empress in ringing tones. "What did you want me for, anyway?" he complained. "I don't get it. Did you hear I've got a big dick or something? Well yes, it's bigger than most, but it's as limp as silk floss right now."

All over the rooms eyes popped and jaws dropped. Who knows how the empress felt? It was unbelievable! The holy aura was gone and the speechless assembly broke out instead in a cold sweat.

Zōga's farewell followed. "I'm an old man, you know," he went on. "My insides don't work and I've got the trots so bad all the time that I shouldn't have come at all. The honor was just too tempting, I suppose. But now, you understand, I can't hold it in any more and, begging your pardon, I've just got to go."

He squatted on the veranda, tucked up his skirts, and let it squirt. The noise was revolting and the stench a horror. Both hit the empress full force. The younger courtiers went into convulsions of laughter, while the monks muttered to each other that Her Majesty was crazy herself to have called in such a lunatic. But nothing Zōga could do seemed to tarnish his unwanted fame.

He was past eighty, as sound as ever in body and spirit, when he understood he was to die in ten days. "At last I'll have what I've always prayed for!" he exclaimed. "Soon I'll leave this world behind and be reborn in paradise!" He had his disciples write verses on going to paradise, and cheerfully made one up himself from a classic paradox:

*Eighty years of patience,
with age slowly wrinkling me
into an old man!
What a joy at last to find
the jellyfish's bones!*

Zōga announced the great day himself. When he called for a go board his disciples brought him one from next door, assuming he wanted to put the Buddha on it. But no, he demanded to be

propped up and in a weak voice invited a close friend to play.

The friend was shocked and saddened that at a time like this, when Zōga should have been calling on Lord Amida and looking forward to his welcome, he was thinking of such foolishness instead. Why, he must be out of his mind! But Zōga was so eminent that the friend dared not disobey. He sat down at the board, and he and Zōga each placed their first ten stones. “All right,” said Zōga, “no more,” and swept the stones from the board.

“Why did you want to play go?” the friend asked timidly.

“I’ve watched people play ever since I was a boy, and as I was calling the Name just now I wanted to try it too.”

Now Zōga demanded to be propped up again. “Get me a pair of stirrup guards,” he commanded, meaning the leather guards that protect a rider’s feet. When they came, he had them tied together and hung round his neck. Then he opened his arms wide, though it was clearly painful for him to do so, and announced he would dance. After doing a little dance he had them removed.

“When I was first on the mountain,” he explained, “a bunch of young monks lived next door and they had a very good time. Once I saw one hang a pair of stirrup guards round his neck and dance to the tune of a clever song which I suppose he’d just made up. It really tickled me. I’d forgotten all about it, but the memory came back just now and I felt like doing it too. That’s all, though. I’ve nothing more on my mind.”

The Venerable Zōga then sent everyone away and retired to an inner room, where he sat in a crude chair facing the west and chanted the Lotus Sutra till he passed into Nirvana.

214.

THE STINKING HUT

A monk once roamed the provinces, worshipping at each holy place, till in Kyushu one day he got lost in a deserted stretch of mountains. For days he saw no sign of another human being.

He was enormously relieved to find a hut at last, but the woman who came to the door warned him that this was no house for him

to stay in. He protested that he was a pilgrim, exhausted and lost. "I don't care what your house is like," he said, "as long as I can rest for a while." In the end the woman gave in and agreed to let him spend the night.

She led him inside, spread a clean mat, and fed him a good meal which he ate gratefully. After dark a man came in with a big bundle on his shoulders and set it down. He was in a religious robe but his hair was cut short, not shaven, and he was too disgustingly filthy to go near.

"Who's this?" he asked on seeing the monk, and when the woman told him, muttered that he was a bit surprised since no one like that had been around for years. Next, he began eating some of the stuff he had brought in. It was all chunks of cattle and horse meat.

By this time the monk was wondering what sort of place he had come to. Obviously the man not only ate meat but lived by supplying the local hunters with meat to feed their dogs. To a pious soul the very thought was horrifying, but in the dark there was nowhere else to go. The monk was stuck, disgusted and miserable, in the little stinking hut.

Very late at night the man got up, washed in warm water, changed into a fresh robe, and went out behind the hut. The curious monk saw him enter a tiny chapel and light the altar lamps and incense. He went on to do the Lotus Confession rite, then chanted the Lotus Sutra through. Finally, after prostrating himself before the altar, he intoned the Name of the Buddha Amida. His voice was deeply holy.

When he left his chapel at dawn, he and the monk found themselves face to face. He said his name was Jōson and he quickly apologized for his ignorance and uncouthness. He acknowledged that despite having been born in a human body he was still committing terrible sins. "If only I could really follow the Buddha's Teaching!" he cried. "But I can't, and that's why I live off meat, which normal people won't touch. I'm so glad karma has brought you here, though, because years from now, on a date I'll tell you, I'm going to leave this world behind and be reborn into the Land of Bliss. Come again then, if you'd like to have the blessing of my passing!"

The monk saw that the man he had taken for an especially

brutish sort of beggar was actually a saint, and he promised to return. Then he went his way.

He came back on the date named by Jōson, curious to see whether or not the prediction would come true. Jōson, now properly shaven and bathed and wearing a clean robe, greeted him joyfully. “I haven’t touched meat for months,” he said, “and tonight I’m going to be reborn in paradise!” His wife was now a nun.

The couple spent the night in their chapel, calling Amida’s Name. As dawn broke, light burst through the chapel door. The monk heard the sweetest of music resound in the sky and move slowly away toward the west, while a delicious fragrance filled the air. At daylight he went into the chapel. Jōson and the nun were seated together facing the west with their palms pressed together in prayer. They had passed away.

The weeping monk prostrated himself in reverence and awe. He never left again, and everyone in the province who heard the story came to receive the blessing of the place.