

HOOVER TATEISHI RADIO PROGRAM

Interview with Mitsumyo Tottori (MT)

ca. 1964

By: Unknown interviewer (Int)

Watashi no Jinsei Dokuhon, or Personal Reminiscences of My Life series

This interview program is a part of “Hoover Tateishi Audio Collection“ by Mr. Tateishi (1929-1979), who had managed Japanese language radio stations KOHO, KIKI, and KZOO in Honolulu in the 1950s, ‘60s & ‘70s.

Mitsumyo Tottori, a Buddhist bishop at the Shingon Shu Temple (Hawaii Shingon Mission) who came to Hawaii in 1925, discusses his work on Maui (ten years at Wailuku Komyoji temple), in Japan (four years), in Haleiwa (six years), and finally at Daigo Bunkyojin (later known as the Liliha Shingonji Mission).

((?)) indicates inaudible or incomprehensible sections of the recording.

MT: Is it too soft? Your voice is...

Int: Good morning. Now, I would like to welcome Mr. Tottori, who will talk about his life story. As you know, Mr. Tottori is the one who is now serving at Liliha Daigo Bunkyojin. Mr. Tottori, welcome to the program. Let's begin now. I have a question I'd like to ask you. I have seen your face around here for a long time, but exactly when did you come to Hawaii?

MT: Oh, it was the 14th year of the Taisho era [1925], so almost 40 years.

Int: When you say Taisho 14, after the earthquake... in 19...

MT: ...25, right?

Int: Was it 5? It was after that immigration law passed.

MT: That's right.

Int: Oh I see. So where did you live at first?

MT: At first, I spent a year and a half at the Betsuin [Hawaii Shingon-shu Betsuin]. Then about 10 years in Maui.

Int: Oh, you spent time in Maui?

MT: At Wailuku's Komyōji Temple for 10 years. Then I was called back to Japan for about four and a half years. Then in 1940... maybe 1940, before the war, I sailed back.

Int: Then you went to Haleiwa?

MT: Yes, right, right. Then I went to Haleiwa. Six years in Haleiwa. Then I retired from the Betsuin.

- Int: Oh, is that so?
- MT: I had been at the Betsuin for 12 years, and, well, I'm still here today.
- Int: Are you half-retired now?
- MT: Yes, I'm having a quiet life.
- Int: That's a little hard to believe; you seem even more active [than before].
- MT: No, no, I live extremely quietly.
- Int: Mr. Tottori, were you at Koyasan when you were a student?
- MT: At first, I went to Koyasan for about 3 years. Then I changed to Kyoto.
- Int: What school was that?
- MT: They called it the Shingonshu Kyoto University. [Now Shuchiin University]
- Int: Shingonshu Kyoto University ... in other words, the Shugei Shuchiin that Kobo Daishi started ... Is that what you mean?
- MT: That's right. It's same place as where the Shugei Shuchiin was.
- Int: It became the Shingonshu Kyoto University. After you finished schooling in Japan, there was a lot of time before you came here, right?
- MT: About two years. I was the temple master in Hiroshima. Then I went to a mission school and did research on missions.
- Int: I'm going to ask something that is not related but, would you mind telling us a story about something you remember from your time training in the mountains?
- MT: It's been such a long time, and the students have changed a lot. Very well, I'll tell you about what a student's daily life was like in the old days. I stayed at a temple, a so-called "dojiki"[jikido—the straight path one should take], and went school. The majority who stayed there were students who didn't have much money for school or those who wanted to train hard at Koyasan. We didn't pay for food, and worked to pay for school. Well, when I went there it was in Taisho 5 ... no, 4. This year is the 1150th anniversary of the opening of Koyasan. I entered Koyasan just after they had a large Buddhist memorial service for the 1100th anniversary. It's exactly fifty years ago. It was hard, but now, it's just the opposite and I feel thankful. Koyasan ... but now I'm looking back and I'm thankful for the food at Koyasan, the temple's meal while I stayed as student. Even now I think about, it was horrible.
- Int: You say you ate tofu all the time?
- MT: Well, if it's only tofu that's still fine. Anyway, it was like this. There were a lot of worshippers. Everyone would stay in their own room. In other words, there were 10 or 20 rice keepers (ohitsu) which the guests served themselves from. Then some people leave food behind in the keeper, like a headband, a white one [ring of leftover rice]. Everything was collected by the priests in the kitchen, who would add water to it and then feed it to the students in the morning and night. Oh, but of course it was a tea porridge [ochagayu], because it's Wakayama prefecture. But a tea porridge isn't a fancy meal like it is here. The leftovers, the food was made from leftovers so it tasted awful.

Int: (Laughter)

MT: Well, I mean, I'd linger and be late for dinner, so everyone who came before me would eat the filling, so there would only be water left when I got there. I'd often say that it was a "bean porridge" rather than a tea porridge. "What is a 'bean porridge", you ask? The bowl would reflect eyeballs.

Int: (Laughter) I see.

MT: And the morning and evening there was a side dish called *gentoku miso*.

Int: Gen ...?

MT: *Gentoku miso*. It's a miso made from rice bran.

Int: Was it made at Koyasan?

MT: Yeah. They would make it there. In order to keep it for a long time, they made it salty. Well, they'd put that in the lipped bowl, right by the big pot. And well, because the manner of the meals was very strict so even in freezing winter, we spread a rush mat on the wooden floor. Then I follow through the table manner [at temple] and eat. That was my breakfast and dinner. The lunch side dish was potatoes. They'd cook them without peeling them and without soy sauce, just boiled with salt. That was the lunch side dish. When it was a better time, when it came to the meals that we served worshipers, we'd give them *gobo* [burdock root] and *daikon* with the skin nicely peeled off. But they didn't throw away the skin. It would be washed thoroughly and nicely chopped, then stir fried in oil or something. They cooked a side dish. It was called *shikazai*, and it's very famous.

Int: How do you write *shikazai*?

MT: *Shikazai* is food for the deer.

Int: Oh!

MT: (Laughter). It's deer food.

Int: Was all of the food brought up to the mountains?

MT: Oh yes, and because it was so inconvenient, we had to be thrifty. And then the most important, main point is to teach you not to waste food. But—and this is a terrible thing to say—the spirit gets thinner, and your thrift matters most instead. The main priest [at the temple] was all right but the priests in the kitchen, they have a contract to take care of a kitchen for a year with certain budget, so they were very thrifty. So it was the most awful thing for the students. If you think about it now, you would shudder at the thought. You became a malnourished person. I also suffered as one of them. After I had been there for about a year and a half, I finally moved to Kyoto.

Int: Ah, I see. I was there twice in August and October. I heard it gets cold in winter.

MT: It was very cold in winter. In my room, well, in the temple, by the time I bathed and returned to my room, the washcloth had already become like a stick. It was pretty cold.

Int: I assume that by that time, there had to be practically nobody climbing the mountain.

MT: No, they came during that time, when the farmers had spare time. For example, in places like the northern prefectures, there were those who made a pilgrimage to the Ise shrine,

and grow old in Takano. So there were a considerable number of worshipers in groups.

Int: Is that so? Well, that's because transportation is so convenient now, you know. In the old days, I came up from Koyaguchi.

MT: Ah yes. Walking from Koyaguchi. The old 50-*cho* 1-*ri de* 3-*ri*[about 15km or 10 miles]. That's the way we walked.

Int: ... And what was the snow like?

MT: Well, the snow seems to be less now, compared to what it was before. It would start at the end of November or early December, and you'd still be walking on snow in March.

Int: Woah, the whole time?

MT: Yes. And in April there was still snow in the valley ... there was quite a bit of snow in the valley. Well, nowadays, it seems that such meals are gradually changing and becoming much better.

Int: But are you still making Buddhist [vegetarian] food?

MT: Oh yes. Yes, Buddhist food. And it was very hard. Now, when I think of the time during which I was undergoing my ascetic training, any food I received, I ate. When I remember that time, in regards to food, I have no dissatisfaction. I feel grateful just to have something to eat. Oh, I think that's one of the best ...

Int: By the way, you became very... much like retired. How are you feeling these days? To me, you seem like you are not retired, and yet you are.

MT: Well, right now I'm something like half-retired. I live quite calmly and quietly. I am very happy. But, I still get up early and do religious Buddhist services. And clean the main hall, the flower stand, and put up and take down the rice. Furthermore, I still do everything with my own two hands. For this, I am extremely happy and grateful. My disposition seems like it is returning to that of when I was a young priest, personally serving the Buddha. That's why ... I'm immensely happy and full of pleasure. What I say might sound like a loss, but it's not, it's true happiness. Though, when I sit down in a large temple, they hire a lot of *yakuso* [priests in charge of temple duties], and they let them handle everything, including serving the Buddha. I'm healthy, so I do everything with my own hands, from putting up and taking down the rice bowls and changing the water of the flowers to mopping the main hall. This service comes from the heart. When I was young, wasn't willing to do this work, but now when I serve I am happy from the bottom of my heart. I am happy to serve and am overjoyed to spend my time in this way.

Int: Thank you very much. Then, Reverend, you frequently go to Japan with everyone. What are your thoughts about returning to Japan and spending the rest of your years there?

MT: Oh, that. Nowadays it seems like more and more people are going back [to Japan] and counting on Social Security [income]. As I said, I've gone back to Japan for four and a half years previously; think about that experience and today's circumstances. As you grow older you follow your children. Furthermore, blood is thicker than water. However, Hawaii also has lots of different parent-child relationships. If you can, when [parents] get older, I think it's better to live in Hawaii near your children. That is, I returned [to Japan], when I was younger. I thought only about the good parts of Japan, and when we were

going back to Japan, we had some money, that's the fact. It's seemed that many goes back in a calculated way (or they figure) that they can do it. But when you went home it doesn't work like that. That can't be helped. If you think about it, even though there are people in Japan who are poor, and consider about the countryside, since our parents and ancestors time, for example, there's community meetings. Perhaps the cleaning of the community graves. In any situation, everyone without exception will be there to help. However, after so many decades in Hawaii, I was able to save a little money and try going home, but I couldn't cultivate that sense of community. That way through the school's donations or the temple's donations, or perhaps a situation similar to the shrine's donation. While you can make a larger donation than other people, and that's great, everyone just uses you. I can do it when I return temporarily, but when I finally return to live permanently in Japan, I won't be able to do it all the time. Then people won't respect me as much, which isn't what you'd expect. It's very easy to get disappointed. So, when I think about it. If you're someone who has already lived in Hawaii for a long time, Hawaii is good. I walked everywhere in America and Japan but, I think that in terms of everything, from perhaps the climate to everything in general, Hawaii is the most wonderful. And then, no matter what you say, when you get old having your children take care of you is the happiest thing. Well, there's a lot money can't solve. As I said, staying near the children is better for now. Often I hear people say "I won't be looked after by my children." in front of [their] children but I don't think that's good. But I think at a certain age we should slowly start to teach them, that when I get old I need to depend on you. That's what I think. I think that is very important.

Int: And for a few years ... every few years you go to Japan.

MT: Yes, that's good. That's fine.

Int: When are you going again?

MT: I don't know yet.

Int: Oh I see. Last year ... did you go this year?

MT: Yes, I went there this year.

Int: Oh I see. So you won't go next year?

MT: No, I won't go next year. Well then, first I wanted to talk a little. This concerns our lives. I believe this is the most important, so I live with this in mind. All happiness and unhappiness, humanity's wellness, but also, jealousy and envy, all of this is the reason ... these are the conditions and truth of Buddhism, sufficiently placed into our minds. If you do not do this, surely everything in this world will contradict and fall out of balance, and make many things incomprehensible in the so-called retribution spanning the three temporal worlds of Buddhism: from the past to the present, and the future. If you measure with a long ruler and think about things, if you reassess, you can resolve the contradictions of the world. Well, I think that this is the most important base of Buddhism that is necessary in our lives. Moreover, another point of Buddhism is of various enlightenment or visits to the Pure Land, but in the end, Buddha is freedom ... because people who receive this freedom [enlightenment] are said to become the Buddha. I'm ridding myself of attachment, living my life in this way. That being said, when something exists, it exists, and when it does not exist, it does not exist. If something exists, use it as

it exists, and if it doesn't, finish it and go. Not only economic problems, but also learning and wisdom. At any rate, if something exists, it exists, and if it doesn't it doesn't. Instead of embellishing and decorating, live a free life. For example when a visitor comes [and you say] “If I don’t have this and that then I can’t provide a lunch”, it’s very narrow minded. If you think it doesn't matter if it's rice with tea or whatever I have, I'll happily provide. If you feel good and produce a good spirit, then whenever people visit you can be carefree and amiable. That's what is known as freedom. The tenets of Buddhism maintain that you are not restrained by attachments and instead live a free life through the practices of Buddhism. Do this yourself ... as much as possible strive to pursue this. I think this is very important.

Int: I am truly grateful to have heard your story. Thank you very much.

MT: No, thank you!