

### Neongyoku (“Chanting on A Human Pillow”)

The master, who is very fond of *utai*, or Noh-chanting, happens to hear Taro-kaja, his servant, doing it very well at home. So he summons him to entertain him with some chanting. Taro-kaja excuses himself, saying that it is a bad habit of his that he is hardly able to sing without drinking. The master takes it kindly and gives him plenty of *sake*. The servant, however, mentions another bad habit of his while chanting: he needs to rest his head on the lap of his wife. The master offers his own lap instead and urges him to begin. Thus he finally starts singing and, indeed, is so accomplished that the master suggests that he could do it equally well sitting on the floor. All at once his voice fails him, so the lord offers his lap again. Taro-kaja instantly recovers his voice. The master has his servant’s head rest on and off his lap several times, until the servant, totally carried away by the joy of singing and the influence of *sake*, stands up singing and dancing, with hilarious but unhappy consequences.

### Yugyo-yanagi (“The Priest and the Willow”)

A priest and his companions travel through many provinces in order to spread the teachings of Ippen-shonin, the holy man (1239-1289). On their way from Kazusa Province (present-day Chiba prefecture) to the Shirakawa Barrier (in Fukushima prefecture), they meet an old man at Nasu-ashino in Shimotsuke province (present-day Ashino, Nasu-cho, Tochigi prefecture). To those who are about to follow a new road, the old man points out the old path along the river, doubtless the main highway in the old days. He guides them to the renowned Withered Willow, about which Saigyō-hoshi (1118-1190) composed a poem ages ago, and recites it for them:

By the side of a road  
Where a clear stream flowed  
In a willow’s shade  
I thought I would pause a moment  
But stood rooted to the spot  
(translation by Donald Keene)

When the priest blesses him by repeating the Invocation ten times, calling on the name of Amida Buddha, the old man disappears into the shades of the tree.

While he continues chanting under the moonlight, the old man appears before him attired in a courtier’s hat and robe, and reveals himself as the Spirit of the Withered Willow. The spirit, blessed by the Invocation which enables the insentient trees and grasses to attain Buddhahood, offers a dance of thanks in his happiness.

Although he is the spirit of the withered willow wearing an old man’s mask, he dances a stately *jonomai* dance in his courtier’s hat and robe, which evokes a refined atmosphere of elegance and grandeur.

By Takao Saijo