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Sharing the Dharma: Reflections on the 10th U.S. Soto Conference

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From October 23 to 26, 2025, the Soto Mission of Hawaii Betsuin in Honolulu became a place of meeting, learning, and shared exploration as we gathered for the 10th U.S. Soto Conference. For many of the approximately 150 participants, this was the first time they had met one another in person. While it was not the largest U.S. Soto Conference ever held, it may have been the first time such a diverse collection of Soto Zen Buddhists gathered for a single event. Participants arrived from across Hawaii, the mainland United States, Japan, Europe, and beyond, bringing with them many different experiences of Soto Zen practices. Among those present were Rev. Daiken Kurayama, Director of the Education and Dissemination Division at the Administrative Headquarters of Soto Zen Buddhism, Bishop Gengo Akiba of the Soto Zen Buddhism North America Office, Rev. Konjin Godwin of the Soto Zen Buddhism International Center, members of Soto Zen International, and 18 priests and members of Fudenji Temple who traveled all the way from Italy, a clear sign of the growing international connections within the Soto Zen world. What unfolded over those days was more than a conference schedule filled with classes and activities. It was a living expression of where Soto Zen in the United States has been, where it is now, and where it may be headed.



Rev. Daiken Kurayama offering greetings during the opening chanting ceremony

Roots and Continuity

The U.S. Soto Conferences began decades ago as a way to maintain and strengthen connections among Soto temples in Hawaii and on the West Coast. In the early years, many participants were Nisei members who carried forward the vision of their Issei parents, those who worked tirelessly to establish temples, nurture sanghas, and transmit the Dharma in a new land. These gatherings offered a precious opportunity to meet, learn together, and reaffirm a shared commitment to practice.

Over time, the Soto Zen world itself continued to change. Practice expanded geographically and culturally as Zen centers and temples took root across North America. Yet for many years, the overall structure of the U.S. Soto Conference remained familiar. That continuity served earlier gatherings well and reflected the needs of the communities at that time, particularly in Hawaii and on the West Coast.

After the long pause brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, with the previous conference having been held in Las Vegas, the passage of time created an opportunity for reflection. Through conversations with priests and lay practitioners between 2020 and 2023, both in the

United States and in Japan, it became clear that while Zen centers had always been welcome, some participants felt that the conference format no longer fully spoke to their interests or aspirations. For some, the emphasis felt more social than practice-centered. Others hoped for opportunities to sit together, study together, and engage more deeply with the Dharma.

Seen in this light, the 10th U.S. Soto Conference became an opportunity to gently reimagine what the gathering could be. Without dismissing or criticizing the past, this conference sought to respond to the present reality of a broader Soto Zen community, one that includes temple-based sanghas, Zen centers, clergy, and lay practitioners from many backgrounds. The aim was to create space for shared practice, learning, and meaningful encounter.

Why a Different Format

One of the most noticeable features of the 10th U.S. Soto Conference was its structure. Instead of moving together as one group from session to session, participants were invited to choose from nearly thirty different offerings and to attend up to eight sessions over the course of the conference. This choice-based format was a deliberate decision, shaped by careful reflection and many conversations during the planning process.

In earlier conferences, moving together as a single group created a strong sense of shared experience. That approach met the needs of those gatherings and helped strengthen bonds within established communities. Today, however, the Soto Zen world is larger and more diverse. Practitioners arrive with different levels of experience, different responsibilities at their

temples, and different interests. Some are rooted in ritual and liturgy, others in meditation practice, cultural expression, social engagement, or education across generations.

The intention behind this year's format was not to move away from togetherness, but to broaden how togetherness could be experienced. By offering a variety of concurrent sessions, participants were free to engage more deeply with what resonated most strongly for them. In this way, the conference became a place where diversity of interest was not something to manage, but something to value.

A Wide Range of Practice and Learning

The sessions offered during the conference reflected this intention. Foundational practices such as Intro to Zazen provided clear and accessible instruction for those new to meditation. More in-depth teachings, including Hachi Dain-ingaku, invited experienced practitioners to reflect on the qualities essential to living the Buddha Dharma in daily life.

Ritual and liturgical training also held an important place in the program. Workshops such as the Kito Workshop introduced participants to blessing services, ritual implements, and the meaning behind practices such as Daihannya Tendoku, omamori, and ofuda. For clergy and lay leaders alike, these sessions offered practical guidance along with a deeper appreciation for the ceremonial life of Soto Zen.

At the same time, the conference recognized that practice is not limited to the meditation hall or the ceremony space. Cultural and creative offerings, including taiko, bon dance, Japanese calligraphy, lei making and juzu making, invited participants to experience the Dharma through

movement, sound, and artistic expression. These activities created moments of joy and connection, reminding us that practice can be embodied, communal, and celebratory.



Rehearsing Baika chanting and ukulele accompaniment



Sutra Copying Workshop

Sessions focused on community life and engagement addressed the realities many temples face today. Programs such as Dharma Keiki: A Buddhist Program for Children and Project Dana: A Program for Our Kūpuna highlighted ways temples can support both younger generations and elders, strengthening bonds across age groups. Other offerings explored contemporary topics, including inclusivity and the presence of Buddhist themes in modern media such as manga and anime. Together, these sessions encouraged participants to consider how the Dharma continues to meet people where they are.



Juju Making Workshop



Shojin Ryori Cooking Class

Gathering After a Time of Distance

The experience of gathering in person carried special meaning in light of recent years. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded us of both the fragility of human connection and the resilience of sangha. Online meetings and virtual services helped sustain relationships during times of separation, yet they also made clear what is lost when we cannot sit, speak, and share space together.

At the 10th U.S. Soto Conference, simple moments such as sharing meals, greeting one another in hallways, and sitting side by side in sessions took on renewed significance. These interactions may not appear in a formal program, but they are often where understand-

ing deepens and friendships are renewed. The conference provided space not only for learning, but also for remembering the value of presence.



Participants dancing Bon Odori

Many Hands, One Effort

A gathering of this scale does not come into being on its own. The 10th U.S. Soto Conference was made possible through the dedication of many individuals, including the conference chairperson and advisors, planning committees, instructors, assistants, volunteers, sponsors, and host temple members. More than fifty priests offered their time and energy to make this conference a success. Their work, often done quietly, was an expression of generosity offered for the benefit of the wider sangha.

From organizing schedules and preparing spaces to welcoming guests and providing meals, each contribution played a role in creating an environment where participants could focus on practice and learning. This collective effort reflects a central truth of Buddhism, that the Dharma is sustained not by any one person, but by many people working together with care and intention.

Looking Ahead

As the 10th U.S. Soto Conference came to a

close, it became clear that this gathering was both a milestone and a beginning. Describing what happened during these days is important, but reflecting on what this format makes possible is equally so.

My hope is that this conference serves as encouragement rather than a model to be copied exactly. Every community has its own history, resources, and needs. What the 10th U.S. Soto Conference offers is an example of how we might create platforms where people from different backgrounds and locations can come together in ways that feel welcoming, meaningful, and sustainable. We do not need to have all the answers in order to begin. What is needed is the willingness to listen, to experiment, and to invite others into the process.

Soto Zen has always adapted to circumstances while remaining grounded in practice. As our communities continue to change, gatherings like this conference can help us explore new ways of supporting one another and sharing the Dharma. If participants leave with the sense that they, too, can help create spaces for connection and learning, whether on a large scale or within their own temples, then the conference has fulfilled a deeper purpose.

The 10th U.S. Soto Conference was a celebration of shared history and a step toward an inclusive future. May the relationships formed, the ideas exchanged, and the inspiration gained continue to unfold in ways that support the flourishing of Soto Zen communities wherever they may be found.



Group photo



Reflections on Homyaku-e

Rev. Ejo McMullen

Buddha Eye Temple, Shobo Butsugenji

At the time of his passing into complete nirvana, which included the dissolution of his physical body, the Buddha Shakyamuni told his disciples that they should first live with reverence and respect for the Dharma of the Precepts. He said that if they did so, life would be bright, and they would have broad and settled hearts. Vigorously maintaining the precepts, it would be the same as if he continued to live in the world. From that ancient time to today, the life of the precepts has been foremost for disciples of the Buddha. For the precepts to sustain the living body of the Buddha, they must be handed from generation to generation through a line of ancestors. For them to live fully in the world, they should also be shared with living beings far and wide.

There are many understandings of and approaches to precepts among the various schools of Buddhism. In our school of Soto Zen, we follow the example of our founder, Dogen zenji, in living a dharma life through the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts. As the lifeblood of our lineage, the giving and receiving of these 16 Bodhisattva Precepts is an important way that we cultivate karmic connection with the Buddhas and Ancestors and a fundamental practice of actualizing a life of true faith. Care for the precepts in our tradition is profound, and the giving and receiving of precepts is a primary gateway through which we are able to meet each

other as bodhisattvas on the Buddha path.

We don't give and receive the precepts because we are more virtuous or accomplished than others. The precepts are an invitation to all beings to live out the life of Buddha, regardless of our virtue or wisdom. When we receive the Bodhisattva Precepts, we are shown a world in which delusion and self-grasping are not destroyed but rather illuminated by Buddha Wisdom and Compassion. This gives us confidence that our own grasping and delusion is not a cause for us to be separated from the Buddha. The Buddhas and Ancestors will meet us and guide us, even in our delusion, to walk the true path. Surely these are the bright lives and broad, settled hearts of which the Buddha Shakyamuni spoke.

The ritual giving and receiving of precepts is found throughout Soto Zen practice in various forms. At most zen centers and temples in North America, precept initiations are conducted through the ordination rites of *tokudo*. Tokudo traditionally is the ceremony conducted to initiate a novice priest, although it is also conducted in many lineages as a way to confer precepts without priestly initiation. Tokudo requires very few people to conduct and is focused around the recipient and the teacher. Perhaps the tradition of undergoing tokudo to confer precepts developed in North America because of the complexity of the more traditional Precept Assemblies and the large staff and abundant resources necessary to conduct them. It is also true that the tokudo rites emphasize the relationship between a particular teacher and student, and put more focus on an individual's initiation to the life of the lineage. While this more individualistic approach may suit North American sentiments,

it is precisely because of our individualistic tendencies that the more traditional Precept Assemblies are an important next step in the maturation of Soto Zen in North America.

At the founding of Buddha Eye Temple, where I serve as abbot, my teacher, Rev. Joshin Keira, led a Precept Assembly known as an Inmyaku Assembly as part of our official opening ceremonies. There are three types of Precept Assemblies: Jukai Assemblies, Homyaku Assemblies, and Inmyaku Assemblies. Jukai Assemblies are the fullest expression of the precept rites and are conducted over a one-week period. Jukai Assemblies are held yearly at the two main monasteries of our school, Eiheiji and Sojiji, and also for special occasions at other temples throughout the world. Homyaku Assemblies are a shorter form, typically three days, but include all the necessary rites for conferring precepts. Homyaku Assemblies are more typical for regular temples and require less preparation, resources, and staffing to conduct. Inmyaku Assemblies are the shortest of the three types. Conducted in just one day, Inmyaku Assemblies do not confer precepts upon the participants but rather confer True Teachings of the 16 Bodhisattva Precepts and connect the participants' karmic conditions with the lineage. Twenty-two people participated in our opening Inmyaku Assembly and seven of us, including Rev. Keira as Preceptor, conducted the ceremonies. Most of the participants went on to receive precepts over the next few years.

Since the founding of Buddha Eye Temple, many years have passed. The continual cooperation and effort of the community brought us to our twentieth anniversary. Over the past two decades the gate that was opened by the

Inmyaku Assembly has guided us. Our connection to the precepts, not just through study or personal experience, but through the living transmission, has allowed us to return again and again to our mutual responsibility and connection. Our temple was founded on the red circle of the Great Vehicle Precepts and so it has sustained and flourished.

Wanting to return to our roots, I decided to ask the Bishop of North America, Rev. Gengo Akiba, if he would honor us by serving as the Precept Master for a Homyaku Assembly at Buddha Eye Temple to celebrate our anniversary. He graciously agreed, and we started in earnest to prepare. It was a big effort, and with the cooperation of many priests from across North America we were able to successfully complete the Homyaku Assembly with 31 participants and 15 attending priests this past spring. I am now even more convinced of the importance of involving the whole temple community in this foundational initiation of receiving precepts. These Precept Assemblies orient the whole community in both the vertical transmission of the Buddha Dharma and the horizontal integration of the Bodhisattva Vows.

Precept Assemblies are mandalas of practice. Every person, whether a participant, a person working in the kitchen, or the Precept Master himself, has a place and role only they can fulfill, and it takes each and every person for the precepts to be handed. There is no place, part, or person that is extra, and every place, part, and person relates back to the central heart of the Buddha's awakening. After all, that is how the precepts function, so it makes sense that the way of passing the precepts is designed with the same principle at heart. The principle is that

each and every being, each and every aspect of life, is not separate from Buddha Mind. How we regard each being and each aspect, how we care for each being and each aspect is vital to the life of awakening. It matters how we live! My life is by the grace of all these beings from which I receive life.

This principle is enacted ritually throughout the entire Precept Assembly, and is particularly intimate through the Rites of True Conferring which are conducted on the final evening. These rites are kept hidden from public view, so I cannot explain them here, but it is enough to say that through them the preceptees and all those in ritual roles and support, manifest the unbroken circle of the Buddha's red heart. It is this together practice (同事*dōji*) that is so important for the Bodhisattva way.

For transmission of the precepts to be possible, followers of the dharma must learn to receive. Precept Assemblies are centered around veneration of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Ancestors that gather to make the initiation possible. In a tokudo ceremony, we call on the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Ancestors to be present as witness. In Precept Assemblies we invite them to a specially constructed altar and repeatedly venerate them with offerings, invocations, and prostrations. Likewise, the Precept Master, Instructing Master, and Guiding Master are met with bows of veneration and respectful attention. This is a shift of focus from "teachers" as people who can share information, experience, and practical knowledge of dharma and practice to "masters" who directly transmit the dharma. Several years ago, while preparing for the Jukai Assembly held for the 100th Anniversary of Soto Zen in North America and the 100th Anniversary

of Zenshuji Temple in Los Angeles, we had a robust conversation about how to translate the titles of the three central teachers who cooperate to confer the precepts in Jukai and Homyaku Assemblies. Previously these three priests had been referred to as "masters": Precept Master, Instructing Master, and Guiding Master. Because of the use of the title "master" in relation to slavery in the Americas, some of our team objected to the use of that title. As we discussed other options such as "teacher" or "priest", it became clear that these other words lacked an important implication of the titles in the Japanese language and context. It was at that point that Bishop Akiba said clearly, "Teachers teach, but masters transmit. We must remember this." These words have stayed with me.

In North America we tend to either refuse to accept and orient through master-disciple relationships, or we rigidly hold to an idealized image of the master. Both of these tendencies cut us off from the vital line of the ancestors. Precept Assemblies structure the sangha in an interactive way so that we can learn how to relate with and receive from ancestors of the present. Learning to relate and receive from living ancestors, we learn how to relate with the lineage as a whole. Precept Assemblies do not do this in a rigid or forced way. It is the very structure of the Precept Assemblies that simply orients all involved to the purpose of sharing in the life of the precepts.

Because of the collaborative nature of Precept Assemblies, collaborative in both a horizontal and vertical way, I would like to encourage more temple communities across the world to study, learn, and begin enacting these ancient rites. While a full Jukai Assembly of seven days

is difficult to manage for most temples, an Inmyaku Assembly or Homyaku Assembly may be in reach. I don't mention this as a criticism of our typical use of tokudo to confer the precepts. I think it is important and appropriate that both Home Leaving and Householder Tokudo continue. It is just that through conducting a Homyaku Assembly at our temple, I have seen how these Precept Assemblies can be an incredible gift for everyone involved.



A Biography of Ejo Zenji, Second Abbot of Eiheiji (Part 2)

Rev. Kenshu Sugawara
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V. Study After Descending from Mount Hiei

Ejo zenji had been studying under Hoin Enno as his teacher at Mount Hiei, but when Hoin passed away in 1220, and having also received admonishment from his mother to study without seeking worldly advancement, he finally descended from Mount Hiei and became a “tonseiso” (a recluse monk) who, unlike official monks, were monks who got away from the path of monastic advancement to pursue individual salvation.

It is said that Ejo zenji first studied Pure Land Buddhism, and according to the *Denkoroku*, he mastered the “profound teachings of Kosaka.” This “Kosaka” refers to Master Shoku (1177-1247, founder of the Nishiyama branch of Pure Land Buddhism), who was a disciple of Master Hōnen. It should be noted that Master Shoku was said to be the adopted son of Minamoto no Michichika (grandfather of Dogen zenji), and thus, like Dogen zenji and Hoin Enno, belonged to the Murakami Genji clan.

Master Shoku was an outstanding disciple of Master Hōnen, and during his time studying under Master Hōnen, he established his residence at Kosaka (located in Higashiyama, Kyoto) and commuted from there to Yoshimizu. For this reason, his teachings were also called “Kosaka-gi.” Therefore, the *Denkoroku* likely

used the expression “Kosaka” to indicate that he had studied under Master Shoku.

However, Ejo zenji determined that his studies in Pure Land teaching would not lead him toward the world-transcending Way of Buddha. In other words, it can be surmised that the Pure Land teachings likely did not connect to resolving the fundamental questions he held.

For this reason, Ejo zenji sought a new subject of study and turned to Zen Buddhism.

VI. Studying in the Daruma School

Although Ejo zenji had studied under Master Shoku, perhaps because it was ultimately not satisfying learning, he subsequently went to study under Master Bucchi Kakuan (dates unknown), who was propagating Zen Buddhism at Tonomine (in present-day Sakurai City, Nara Prefecture).

In old records he is called “Master Kakuan of the Daruma School.” This “Daruma School,” while being another name for Zen Buddhism, according to Soto Zen tradition (*Shisho no Josho*, a supplementary document certifying Dharma transmission, by Tettsu Gikai zenji), refers to a branch where Dainichbō Nonin (dates unknown) received certification by letter from Setsuan Tokko (also known as Busshō zenji or Zhuoan Deguang) of the Chinese Rinza Daie (Dahui) lineage and spread the teachings in Settsu (present day northern Osaka). One of Nonin’s disciples was Master Bucchi Kakuan, who initially spread the teachings in Higashiyama, Kyoto, but later moved to Tonomine, so we can understand that Ejo zenji studied under him at

that stage.

Research to date has shown that the early Soto community included many people with Daruma School backgrounds. Besides Ejo zenji, Kakuan’s disciples included Ekan and Egi (said to have been a nun), and among Ekan’s disciples were Tettsu Gikai zenji, who later became the third abbot of Eiheiiji, Gien zenji who became the fourth abbot of Eiheiiji, and Gijun zenji (who served as a scribe under Dogen zenji).

According to old records about Ejo zenji, Kakuan taught the doctrine of “*Kensho Jobutsu*” (seeing one’s nature and becoming Buddha) and lectured on the *Surangama Sutra*. “*Kensho Jobutsu*” appears in texts attributed to Bodhidharma, and among multiple ancestral masters of the Rinza Yogi (Yangqi) lineage (Dahui branch), which includes Setsuan Tokko, who certified dharma transmission to Nonin, as well as Goso Hoen (Wuzu Fayan), Engo Kokugin (Yuanwu Keqin), and Daie Soko (Dahui Zonggao). There are examples of them taking up the teaching “*Tanden Shin-in*” (a single transmission of the mind-seal), “*Furyu Monji*” (not dependent on words and letters), “*Jikishi Ninshin*” (directly pointing to the human mind), “*Kensho Jobustu*” (seeing one’s nature and becoming Buddha) as the teaching transmitted by Bodhidharma.

The term “*Kensho*” (seeing one’s nature) appears multiple times in the *Surangama Sutra*, and the Daruma School used this sutra in teaching practitioners. The most important teaching that Ejo zenji learned under Kakuan was the “kalabimka vase metaphor” explained in Volume 2 of the *Surangama Sutra*. The passage

is as follows:

“Ananda, suppose there is a person who takes a kalabimka vase, plugs its two openings, fills it with air, and carries it to a country a thousand miles away. The consciousness-skandha is like this. Ananda, empty space neither comes from there nor enters here. Ananda, if it came from there, when the vase with air inside goes away, empty space should be lacking in the place where the vase originally was. If air enters here, when the vase opening is opened and turned over, one should see the air entering here. Therefore, you should truly know that the consciousness-skandha is false and illusory, originally neither created by causes and conditions nor existing naturally.”

This passage is part of the World-Honored One presenting five metaphors to Ananda to show that each of the five skandhas (form, sensation, perception, mental formations, consciousness) is the Tathāgata-garbha and the nature of True Suchness. Among these, the above passage demonstrates the false and illusory nature of the “consciousness-skandha” (the function of recognition and judgment, or the subjective mind of cognition). In other words, it poses the question: if one plugs the opening of a kalabimka vase (a vase with one body and two openings shaped like the legendary beautiful-voiced bird, the kalavinka), travels a thousand miles, and then opens it, can empty space be seen as having moved from the original location to the new location? If it had moved, the empty space at the original location would have been lacking, and at the new location one

should see empty space coming out of the vase, but in reality such a thing cannot happen. Similarly, the consciousness-skandha is like empty space: it is unrelated to arising and ceasing or increase and decrease, is not created by causes and conditions, and is not something that exists naturally (natural existence). It is also known that a text called *Shinkon Ketsugi-sho*, considered to be Kakuan’s work, contains the “kalabimka vase metaphor,” so it appears certain that Ejo zenji received such instruction under Kakuan.

Through this story, Ejo zenji realized that phenomena have no arising and ceasing, and as a result, his attainment was certified by Kakuan. It is said that Ejo zenji was revered by the other monks under Kakuan (according to old records, more than 50 people).

Regarding the words Kakuan spoke when certifying Ejo zenji’s attainment, the old record *Sanso Gyogoki*, “Chronicle of the Three Ancestors of Eihei-ji”, states that he said, “You have been liberated from the ignorance that has continued from a beginningless past.” However, the *Denkoroku* additionally records that he also said, “All sins and delusions have completely vanished, and all suffering has been liberated.” Among these, his mention of “sins and delusions” is interesting. From his death verse and self-inscription, it is known that Ejo zenji maintained a deep awareness of karmic wrongdoing until his passing. And if Kakuan mentioned “sins and delusions” as recorded in the *Denkoroku*, there is a possibility that Ejo zenji had already expressed awareness of karmic wrongdoing at the stage when he studied under the Daruma School. Kakuan may have certified that

the attainment Ejo zenji had gained also resolved these issues based on the principles of the Daruma School. However, Ejo zenji himself later asked deep questions about karmic wrongdoing when he studied under Dogen zenji (*Shobogenzo Zuimonki*), so he must have judged that the attainment certified by the Daruma School alone was insufficient.

Incidentally, in the Honcho Kosoden Volume 19, “Biography of Monk Nonin of Sanpoji Temple in Settsu Province,” written by the Rinzaï Myoshinji sect monk Mangen Shibān in Genroku 15 (1702) in Edo period, traditions not found in other records are transmitted. It agrees with old records that Ejo zenji studied under Kakuan when he was advocating Zen teachings at Tonomine. However, details such as Kakuan recommending that Ejo zenji follow Dogen zenji when Kakuan was approaching his end, presenting his own work *Shin’yo*, and transmitting Dharma objects inherited from Nonin, do not appear in other texts.

Among these points, it is well known that the Daruma School possessed Dharma objects transmitted from China, which were mainly transmitted at Sanpoji Temple in Settsu. Also, some were transmitted from Kakuan through Ekan to Tettsu Gikai zenji, and Gikai zenji further transmitted them to Keizan Jokin zenji.

However, there is no record in old sources that Ejo zenji inherited Daruma School Dharma objects. Even when Gikai zenji mentioned Daruma School Dharma objects, he did not say that Ejo zenji had inherited them. Therefore, Mangen’s assertion should perhaps be consid-

ered a confusion with Ekan.

Although Ejo zenji studied Pure Land teaching and the Daruma School as described above, when he heard that Dogen zenji had returned to Japan in Karoku 3 (1227) and entered Kenninji Temple, he went to Kenninji and engaged in doctrinal debate. I would like to discuss the details of this in the next article.





My Footnotes on Zazen (30) The Five Hindrances That Cover Zazen - Five Hindrances Theory (1)

Rev. Issho Fujita

In the *Hōkyōki* (*Baoqing Records*), a text that records the teachings Dogen zenji directly received from his teacher Tendo Nyojo zenji in China, there is the following exchange:

[Dogen zenji] respectfully asked: “What is body-mind dropping off?” The Abbot [Nyojo zenji] instructed, saying: “Body-mind dropping off is zazen. When one simply practices zazen, the five desires will leave, and the five hindrances will be removed.”

Also, in another passage:

The Abbot [Nyojo zenji] compassionately instructed, saying: “The children and grandchildren of the buddhas and ancestors must first remove the five hindrances, and then remove the sixth hindrance. The sixth hindrance is made by adding the hindrance of ignorance to the five other hindrances. By removing only the hindrance of ignorance, one removes the other five hindrances. Even if one removes the five hindrances, if the hindrance of ignorance has not been eliminated, one has not yet reached the practice-realization of the buddhas and ancestors. ... (omitted) ... What have you been doing in your practice up until now? This (zazen) is precisely the method for leaving the six

hindrances. Buddhas and ancestors, without waiting for gradual stages, through direct pointing and singular transmission, have left the five and six hindrances and rejected the five desires and so on. Simply sitting and practicing [*shikantaza*], with body-mind dropping off—this is the art of leaving the five hindrances, five desires, and so on. Beyond this, there is absolutely nothing else, not a single other thing. How could there be falling into two or falling into three?”

This is the teaching of Nyojo zenji as recorded in the *Hokyoki*.

These two passages in the *Hokyoki* are places where Nyojo zenji specifically explained to Dogen zenji the issue of “zazen and hindrances,” and they seem to me to be passages where extremely interesting and important things are being said. In the omitted middle section of the above quotation, after hearing Nyojo zenji’s teaching on the five hindrances and the hindrance of ignorance, Dogen zenji made prostrations in gratitude and with hands in *shashu* said, “I have never once heard such teaching before. No one has ever taught me such things. Today, fortunately, I have received the Master’s special compassion and been able to hear previously unheard teachings. This must surely be the grateful reward of good roots accumulated in past lives.” His state of deep feeling is described this way. Something must have resonated in Dogen zenji’s heart and mind. And immediately after, he presses on with the question: “Is there some special method for removing the five or six hindrances?” Nyojo zenji, smiling, answers straightforwardly as in the quotation above:

“The zazen you practice and devote yourself to day and night is precisely that.”

The five hindrances discussed here (or six hindrances including the hindrance of ignorance) are unavoidable issues in actually practicing zazen, so I intend to investigate these “hindrances” going forward. Since hindrances are mental functions that obstruct zazen, it is absolutely necessary to gain some degree of understanding about them beforehand when practicing zazen. Also, how one meets these things when they arise during zazen is an important matter for investigation.

According to Seibun Fukaura’s *Outline of Abhidharma Studies (Kushagaku Gairon, Hyakkaen)*, which I have at hand, “hindrance” (*gai*)¹ means “covering,” and “they are called this because hindrance cover and conceal the pure and wholesome mind and prevent it from developing. Ultimately they are another name for defilements.” We ordinary beings live completely covered by these “lids,” so we cannot let shine the pure mind (the naturally pure mind) that we inherently possess. If we apply this to our zazen practice, we could say these are mental functions that prevent zazen from becoming zazen, like walls that block the deepening of zazen. Like lids, they cover zazen and block the bright world that zazen opens, clouding the radiance of zazen. This is how the defilements that all humans possess are metaphorically described.

Usually we are rarely aware of the existence of these lids (= defilements), but strangely, when we practice zazen, they immediately become

vividly perceptible. Because the five hindrances are such familiar parts of our inner world, we either overlook the influence they have on our lives or are completely unaware of it, but when we practice zazen, they become much more clearly visible.

The first time I practiced zazen was at a winter student retreat at Lay Practitioners’ Hall at Engakuji in Kamakura, Japan. On someone’s recommendation, with no prior knowledge and no mental preparation whatsoever, I suddenly plunged into the retreat. This first retreat of my life was a week in which I was shown, ad nauseam, the “defilements” within myself. Some time ago, when I was occasionally writing scripts for the Soto Zen telephone dharma talks, I wrote the following passage titled “Zazen is the Mirror of Pure Crystal”:

When I was a child, my grandmother told me stories about Enma, the great king of hell. Enma acts like a judge who judges dead people. He has a special mirror that reflects all of one’s deeds during life. In Buddhism, this is called the “mirror of pure crystal” (*jōhari no kagami*). “Before this mirror, no secret can be hidden. If you are found to have lied, as punishment Enma will pull out your tongue!” She would say this with a straight face, and being pure-hearted, I believed it for a long time. But eventually I came to think it was merely a cautionary tale to teach “don’t tell lies” and a product of my imagination.

Later, when through various connections I became familiar with zazen, people would

often say to me, “During zazen you must be free of thoughts and feelings—it must feel so good!” But in reality, that’s rarely the case. At least in my case, the poem “If what reflects in my heart-mirror were visible, how ugly the form would surely be” often fits perfectly. In zazen, my everyday “shallowness” and “pettiness” are vividly brought into relief right before my eyes. At one point, this experience suddenly connected with my grandmother’s story about the mirror of pure crystal. I realized: “The mirror of pure crystal really exists! It wasn’t a lie. It’s zazen!”

My first zazen experience at Engakuji over thirty years ago was exactly as described in the poem “If what reflects in my heart-mirror were visible, how ugly the form would surely be.” All sorts of fantasies that I couldn’t possibly tell anyone about arose one after another of their own accord, completely beyond my control. I felt sorry for myself. “I came here to practice zazen to calm my mind, but zazen seems to be igniting my defilements even more. Isn’t zazen bringing to the surface defilements that had been quietly hiding? I should stop this immediately. Quit zazen. Quit.” An inner voice rang loudly in my ears. I was shown what kind of person I really was, and I became quite depressed. However, there’s no doubt that this painful experience was what caused me to become “hooked” on zazen. If my zazen had gone well at that time—that is, if I had been able to do “good” zazen exactly as I had imagined and idealized—I probably wouldn’t be practicing zazen today. Thanks to that terrible week, I thought from the bottom of my heart: “Since I’m such a person covered in defilements, if I don’t

practice zazen from now on, I might very well ruin my entire life. Unless I’m ‘glared at, scolded, obstructed, and dragged along’ by zazen, which is the ‘mirror of pure crystal,’ I’m done for.”

When I first started zazen, I thought that if I practiced zazen seriously, through its merit such defilements would gradually decrease, and eventually defilements would stop arising even during zazen. However, later, when I was reading *Listen to Zen (Zen ni Kike, Daihōrinko)*, a collection of famous sayings by Kodo Sawaki Roshi, I found several unexpected statements on this point:

○ Some people say, “When I do zazen, deluded thoughts arise.” That’s not it. It’s precisely because you do zazen that you can clearly see that deluded thoughts are arising. When you’re dancing, caught up in your delusions, you don’t notice them at all. When sitting zazen, even if a single mosquito flies by, you clearly notice, “Ah, it bit me,” but when dancing, even if a flea bites your balls, you don’t notice and keep dancing in a trance.

○ Some people say that when they sit zazen, many deluded thoughts arise, but the fact that you notice deluded thoughts arising is because the waves and wind have calmed and the heat has descended.

○ When sitting zazen, various thoughts surface and you think, “Is this okay?” But the fact that you think “Is this okay?” is because zazen is naturally pure, and you’re being glared at by this natural purity. If we were drinking alcohol and doing silly dances dressed only in our underwear, we wouldn’t notice such things.

○ As long as we’re alive, it’s natural that vari-

ous psychological functions arise.

○ Only “ordinary beings” worry about deluded thoughts.

According to what Sawaki Roshi said, it seems that delusive thoughts and zazen do not exist in a relationship where they oppose and exclude each other on the same dimension. Zazen is not an effort to prevent deluded thoughts from arising or to eliminate deluded thoughts that have arisen. Rather, it is only against the background of naturally pure zazen that deluded thoughts can be recognized as deluded thoughts. This itself is the merit of zazen. Moreover, he said that even with deluded thoughts, zazen doesn’t mind them at all and isn’t troubled in the least. Calling deluded thoughts “deluded thoughts” and treating them as troublemakers for zazen is talk from the side of “ordinary beings,” and from the side of zazen, no matter what deluded thoughts may be, they exist as “beyond thinking” (arising beyond thinking and ceasing beyond thinking) or as “thunder rumbling below the mountain in the great sky without clouds” (no matter what violent storm, the void is not damaged in the least), so the light of zazen is not dimmed by deluded thoughts at all. Zazen does not reject deluded thoughts. Since trying to reject deluded thoughts is itself a deluded thought, there’s no way to reject them. Zazen must be the practice of [realizing] emptiness.

If this is so, then Nyojo zenji’s expression to Dogen zenji that “zazen eliminates (or removes) the five or six hindrances” cannot mean simply separating or removing the five hindrances from zazen by some means, like surgically excising

cancer cells from the body. If not that, then how should we understand these words? What is the actuality of “leaving” or “removing” in a sense other than that?

In Mahāyāna traditions, defilements are not regarded as something to be eradicated as evil, but rather as the very ground from which awakening or virtue arises. This view can be seen in Zen teachings such as “delusions are themselves enlightenment”, “life-and-death are themselves nirvāna”, and “the very nature of ignorance is Buddha-nature, the illusory body of emptiness is itself the Dharma-body” (*Shōdōka, Song of Realization*), as well as in Jōdo Shinshū teachings that speak of “attaining nirvana without severing defilements” and “though hindrances are extinguished, there is nowhere they go; like ice melting to become water—the more ice, the more water; the more hindrances, the more virtue.”

We must not overlook that this way of thinking about hindrances (defilements) and the approach to them differs considerably from common sense notions. I will discuss this important issue again later, but here let us first examine in detail what the five hindrances and the hindrance of ignorance that Nyojo zenji spoke of actually are. (to be continued in the next issue.)

¹ The English term hindrance translates the kanji *gai*. The literal meaning of this character—which in everyday Japanese is read *futa*—is “lid,” suggesting something that covers or closes the mind.

NEWS

October 10~12, 2025

Europe Zen Workshop was held at Zendonien in Blois, France.

October 14, 2025

Association of Soto Zen North America Conference was held at Zenshuji, in Los Angeles, U.S.A.

October 14.15, 2025

North America Zen Workshop was held at Zenshuji, in Los Angeles, U.S.A.

October 22, 2025

Hawaii Soto Zen Conference was held at Shoboji in Hawaii, U.S.A.

October 22~24, 2025

Hawaii Soto Zen Workshop was held at Shoboji in Hawaii, U.S.A.

October 23~26, 2025

10th U.S. Soto Conference was held at Shoboji in Hawaii, U.S.A.

October 24, 2025

Europe Soto Zen Conference was held via Zoom.

November 29, 2025

South America Zen Conference was held at Zengenji, in Mogi das Cruzes, Brazil.

February 21, 2026

Hawaii Soto Zen Conference was held at Shoboji in Hawaii, U.S.A.

March, 2026 (five sessions)

A total of five South America Zen Workshops were held via Zoom.

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