



SOTO ZEN JOURNAL

DHARMA EYE

News of Soto Zen Buddhism: Teachings and Practice

Baika (1): Singing as a Zen Practice p1
Michaela Mross

Toshoji Monastic Training: The Valley of Continuous Practice p8
Ryuki Hawkins

A Biography of Ejo Zenji, Second Abbot of Eihei-ji (Part 3) p13
Kenshu Sugawara

My footnotes on Zazen (31) p16
Issho Fujita

法
眼

Number

58

September 2026



Baika (1): Singing as a Zen Practice

Michaela Mross
Assistant Professor,
Stanford University

In May 2027, the Soto school will celebrate the 75th anniversary of the Baikaryu 梅花流 (Plum Blossom Style), a highly popular lineage of singing Buddhist hymns. Practitioners from all across Japan, and likely from abroad as well, will gather in Tokyo to honor this important milestone. It will be a lively and joyous celebration during which thousands of practitioners will come together, with one local group after another performing a Baikaryu hymn on stage.¹

Since the founding of the Baikaryu in the 1950s, singing hymns has become a popular practice in Soto Zen. It is probably the most widespread practice among Japanese laypeople, and its national meeting is the largest regular event that the Soto school hosts. Many Soto temples in Japan have a Baika group (*baika ko* 梅花講) that meets regularly and is led by the head priest or a family member. During funerals, memorial services, and other major rituals, many clerics also sing these hymns. For Baika practitioners, singing is not a mere musical endeavor; it is a profound Buddhist practice. As a renowned teacher writes, “To study Baikaryu hymns is to study the teachings of the Buddha and the two patriarchs Dogen zenji and Keizan zenji. ... It is a wonderful practice of the Buddha way.”²

Although the Baikaryu is a relatively recent innovation, its origins can be traced back to the tenth century, when the Japanese developed liturgical forms in the vernacular so listeners could understand the content of the chants. Among these new liturgical genres were Japanese hymns called *wasan* 和讃 and devotional songs called *goeika* 御詠歌. The Baikaryu hymns are based on these two poetic genres and are formally called *Baikaryu eisanka* 梅花流詠讃歌. Colloquially, practitioners often refer to them as *Baika* 梅花.

The Baikaryu repertoire comprises over eighty hymns. Many of the hymns poetically express veneration for the Buddha, various bodhisattvas, Bodhidharma, Dogen zenji, and Keizan zenji by describing their virtues. Several hymns are intended to be sung during funerals and memorial services, capturing the grief of those who have lost a loved one. There are also hymns written for specific rituals, such as the ceremony of receiving the precepts, the memorial services of temple founders, the *Higan* and *Obon* services, and Buddhist weddings. Additionally, some hymns focus on right livelihood and communal practice, while others pray for world peace.

Singing Baikaryu hymns is primarily a communal practice, and practitioners typically sing together during group practices and rituals. There are several ways to integrate Baikaryu hymns into ceremonies. Most commonly, the Baika group of the temple sings a hymn when the officiant enters the hall and another one when the officiant leaves. A popular hymn to sing when the officiant enters is *Sanbo gowasan*

三宝御和讃 (Japanese Hymn of the Three Treasures), which expresses refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and describes how the practitioners proceed on their way to enlightenment through the guidance of the Three Treasures. This is also the hymn most practitioners learn first. Because most members of the Baika groups are laywomen, the integration of Baikaryu hymns in ceremonies has increased their engagement in Soto rituals.

The hymns are sung in unison with melodies based on traditional major or minor pentatonic scales, which omit the fourth and seventh scale degrees. The hymns vary in style, ranging from solemn, slow melodies to uplifting, faster pieces. Within the repertoire, there are a few hymns that drew inspiration from popular music, such as *Magokoro ni ikiru* まごころに生きる (Living Sincerely), which was composed by the singer-songwriter Kosetsu Minami.

The singing of the hymns is accompanied by two high-pitched bells: a small flat bell (*sho* 鉦) and a vajra handbell (*rei* 鈴). All practitioners play these instruments: in their right hand, they hold a mallet to strike the flat bell, while in their left hand, they hold the vajra handbell and ring it by moving the instrument. These bells, as well as the hymnbook, are wrapped in a beautiful purple-golden cloth adorned with plum blossoms and the emblems of the two head temples, Eiheiji and Sojiji. The small flat bell is placed on a small square cloth featuring a plum blossom in the same colors. It is sounded on the first two beats, followed by the vajra handbell on the third and fourth beats, clearly marking the 4/4 meter. During some pieces, the singers

vary this basic rhythmic pattern or perform special movements with the bells that express deep devotion toward the objects of worship.



Setup of the instruments and hymnbook before singing

Practitioners usually do not need to memorize the hymns; instead, they use the hymnbook when they sing. The book provides the lyrics of the hymns along with a unique musical notation. To the right of the lyrics, which are written in hiragana script, there are various lines that indicate the melodies. The direction of a line in relation to a circle or triangle—representing the small flat bell and the vajra handbell, respectively—indicates a relative pitch, allowing singers to choose a key that is comfortable for their vocal range. Small, thin lines stemming from the main lines represent the beats, and the length of a line indicates the duration of a tone. It takes practitioners time to master this notation system; yet, it is highly effective at conveying the melodies and rhythm of the hymns.

When practitioners sing communally, there are two important solo parts. First, one group member introduces the title of the piece by intoning: “Now we reverently intone [title of the hymn],” ending with a beautiful melodic embellishment. It is followed by another group member singing the first line of the hymn, after which all singers join in. The group member who

introduces the title needs to select a pitch that is suitable for the group; because their vocalization ends on the fifth scale degree, it determines the key. The practitioner singing the first line of the piece establishes the tempo. Additionally, both singers set the emotional tone of the piece.

Baikaryu practice is not solely a lay practice. As mentioned above, priests also sing Baikaryu hymns during ceremonies. For example, at the head temple Sojiji, priests specializing in Baikaryu participate in major rituals, such as the week-long assembly for receiving the bodhisattva precepts (*Jukaie* 授戒会) in spring or the memorial service for Sojiji's first two abbots in autumn. Just like Baika groups at local temples, the clerics sing hymns together when the officiant enters and exits the hall. Additionally, one of them sings a hymn solo without bell accompaniment when the officiant presents offerings in refined lacquerware. This vocalization imbues the ritual with a deeply solemn atmosphere and serves as a sonic offering to the buddhas and patriarchs.



Jukaie at Sojiji in 2024

Baikaryu practice involves one's entire body and mind. Practitioners follow the famous proverb "Proper conduct is the Buddha Dharma, and

etiquette is the principle of our school." Like monks and nuns who are encouraged to execute all activities with the utmost precision, Baikaryu practitioners do not move freely while singing hymns; every movement is precisely prescribed, from unfolding the cloth that holds the hymn-book and bells, to the method for placing and handling the bells, to the manner of exiting the hall during performances on stage. In this way, both clergy and laity are held to the same standard of deportment.

Many Baikaryu practitioners first encountered these hymns during funerals or memorial services, when they heard a priest or a Baika group sing. Providing comfort in times of deep grief and making offerings to departed loved ones are among the most important functions of Baikaryu practice. Many of the hymns express the deep sorrow of losing a loved one, such as *Tsuizen kuyo gowasan* 追善供養御和讃 (Japanese Hymn for the Memorial Service of One's Ancestors), whose first two verses read:

*Dewdrops appear on a lotus leaf, a drop of dew falls from the lotus leaf. Long life is our human desire, but ephemerality is our human life. What existed yesterday, today is a dream. The figure we see in the dream is the shadowed image in our minds, but we put our palms together to the image with a sincere heart.*³

Moved by these hymns, some devotees develop an interest in singing and join the Baika group at their local temple. The groups are led by the temple priest or a family member, who teaches the members the melodies of the hymns and the correct performance practice. Each prac-

tice meeting starts with opening verses and the chanting of the *Heart Sutra*, and it ends with the recitation of a dedication of merit, clearly framing the sessions as a Buddhist practice. During these meetings, the teachers first sing the entire hymn. Then, they teach the melody line by line without the bell accompaniment by singing a phrase and having the group members repeat it back. Once they have gone through the whole piece, everyone sings it together, first by clapping the beats and then with the bell accompaniment. The teachers also explain the meaning of the lyrics in detail, allowing practitioners to deepen their faith by learning about Buddhist concepts and ideas. Instructors suggest that by singing the hymns, their meaning sinks into the practitioners' minds and bodies, and as a result, practitioners will naturally express the Buddhist teachings in their daily lives.



Workshop with the renowned Baikaryu teacher Rev. Kitano Ryosho

The Baikaryu is further characterized by a strong organizational structure. All members of Baika groups in Japan are officially registered with the Soto school's headquarters. After practicing for a while, members will take their first exam, during which they perform a few hymns in front of a jury. Continuing on this path, they will undergo successive exams to advance to

higher ranks. The ranks are indicated by the color of the tassels on the vajra handbell and the mallet. In ascending order from lowest to highest rank, the colors are purple, blue, white, and finally, white with golden threads.

The groups furthermore provide a social support network that is vital for many lay practitioners. Many members are women in their 80s or 90s who might have been widowed and rarely leave their homes otherwise. During my fieldwork, some of them expressed how grateful they are for the opportunity to practice Baika. One woman told me that usually she sits alone at home watching TV or reading the news, but singing Baika and chatting with the others after the meetings brings immense joy to her life. In this way, Baika groups provide much-needed social connections while helping devotees deepen their practice and faith within community, as the popular song *Dogyo gowasan* 同行御和讃 (Japanese Hymn of Practicing Together) expresses:

*We are the pure friends who bond with each other as the disciples of the Buddha. Encouraging and caring for each other, we walk the path of the same practice and the same cultivation.*⁴

In all of these ways, Baika practice has enriched the lives of thousands of practitioners since its establishment in 1952. The integration of Baikaryu hymns into the liturgy has led to greater active participation in rituals among laypeople, especially women. Moreover, by introducing melodious hymns to complement the traditional sutra chanting, which is typically done in a constant rhythm on a single pitch, the

Baikaryu offered a new soundscape that modernized Soto Zen liturgy after World War II. In the next issue, I will turn to the history of the Baikaryu and explore how this vibrant tradition evolved.

If you would like to hear Baika hymns, recordings are available on the website listed in footnote 1.

¹ For recordings of Baikaryu hymns, see, for example, Sotozen.com webpage

<https://www.sotozen.com/eng/practice/baikaryu/index.html>

the official YouTube channel of the Soto school's Baikaryu division

https://www.youtube.com/@baikaryu_eisanka

the YouTube channel of clerics from Akita Prefecture

<https://x.gd/YfNnk>

or the YouTube channel of the Young Monks' Association from Fukushima Prefecture

<https://www.youtube.com/@fukusousei>

The Soto school has also published an English Baikaryu handbook: *Soto Zen Buddhism Baikaryu Eisanka: Encounter with the Buddha*, which is available online:

<https://www.sotozen.com/eng/practice/baikaryu/pdf/sutra.pdf>

² Yasuda Kosho. "Baikaryu no rekishi to waga shi." *Otayori* 164 (2024): 29–30.

³ Translation adapted from *Soto Zen Buddhism Baikaryu Eisanka: Encounter with the Buddha* (Tokyo: Sotoshu Shumicho, 2018), 53.

⁴ Translation from *Soto Zen Buddhism Baikaryu Eisanka: Encounter with the Buddha* (Tokyo: Sotoshu Shumicho, 2018), 54.

な な な 〇—
 む む む ㄣ
 き き き △
 え え え ㄣ
 そ ほ ぶ (—) 〇
 ー ー つ ㄣ
 と と と △
 と と と 〇
 な な な ㄣ
 え え え ㄣ
 よ よ よ ㄣ
 や や や 〇—
 ● △
 ● △

ひ ふ ち 〇
 じ ー か ㄣ
 り ね い △
 に に を ㄣ
 た さ ね 〇
 ー お ー ㄣ
 よ さ ー ㄣ
 る す う ㄣ
 も も も 〇
 の の の ㄣ
 は は は ㄣ
 み み み ㄣ
 な な な 〇—
 ●

み き い 〇—
 ち よ と ㄣ
 を き も ㄣ
 つ め と 〇
 た ぐ ー ㄣ
 え み と ㄣ
 し に き ㄣ
 も ゆ み 〇
 ろ く ほ ㄣ
 も の と ㄣ
 ろ り け ㄣ
 の の の 〇—
 ● △
 ● △
 17

(三) (二) (一) (頭)
 さ う こ 〇—
 と き こ ㄣ
 り よ ろ △
 の の の ㄣ
 き な や ㄣ
 し み み ㄣ
 に を を ㄣ
 (衆) (衆) (衆)
 わ の て 〇
 た り ら ㄣ
 る こ し ㄣ
 べ え ま ㄣ
 き て す 〇—
 ●

三 宝 御 和 讃
 敬 虔 に 明 る く

拍 速 五 〇 位

16

Traditional Musical Notation for *Sanbo Gowasan*
 (Hymn of the Three Treasures)

Sanbō Gowasan

Lyric writer *Doken Takada*
Composer *Enryu Gondo*

♩ = 50

(Leader) (Everyone)

Sho (Right)
Rei (Left)

1. Ko Ko — Ro No — Ya — Mi O Te Ra — Shi Ma — Su —

2. U Ki — Yo No — Na — Mi O No Ri — Ko E — Te —

3. Sa To — Ri No — Ki — Shi Ni Wa Ta — Ru Be — Ki —

I — To Mo To — To Ki Mi Ho — To Ke — No

Ki — Yo Ki Me Gu — Mi Ni Yu Ku — No Ri — No

Mi — Chi O Tsu Ta — E Shi Mo Ro — Mo Ro — No

Chi Ka — I O Ne — Go O Mo No — Wa — Mi — Na —

Fu — Ne Ni Sa O — Sa Su Mo No — Wa — Mi — Na —

Hi Ji — Ri Ni Ta — Yo Ru Mo No — Wa — Mi — Na —

Na Mu — Ki — E Bu — Tsu To To Na — E — Yo — Ya

Na Mu — Ki — E Ho — To To Na — E — Yo — Ya

Na Mu — Ki — E So — To To Na — E — Yo — Ya

Western Musical Notation for *Sanbo Gowasan*
(Hymn of the Three Treasures)



Toshoji Monastic Training: The Valley of Continuous Practice

Rev. Ryuki Hawkins
Kojin-an Zendo

In the south part of the Bicchu region of Okayama Prefecture, in a village called Yokodani in Yakage-cho, a forested valley holds a monastery shaped by centuries of practice. Toshoji was established in the eighth century, one of the first Buddhist temples in its region. Shinto priests had long recognized what the land was offering: the natural protection of hills covered in dense vegetation, providing a safe harbor from typhoons, its cupped silence inviting the settling of minds. It is said that Toshoji was founded as a Hossō school temple by Kōshō Bosatsu of Kōfukuji Temple in Nara. It became a Soto Zen temple in 1412, carrying the lineage of Dogen zenji and Keizan zenji. Its historical weight is considerable: the protection of the great clans of Mori and Tokugawa; shelter for the wandering poet-monk Ryokan, who practiced at Entsuji in nearby Tamashima; and by the Edo period, Toshoji served as the “mother” temple for 1,200 affiliated temples. In more recent times, it is also known as a sacred site for the composition of the lyrics of *baikaryu eisanka*, the Soto hymn practice.

About twenty years ago, Seido Suzuki Roshi, trained at Eihei-ji and with close ties to America, took up the temple, which had fallen into disrepair, and built a *sōdō* — a formal training hall. Toshoji became a designated

Sotoshū senmon sōdō, an official training monastery for international practitioners.



The valley rises as you enter it. The hills close in a U-shape, and the sense of enclosure is immediate — not claustrophobic, but held. A small lake sits at the base of the temple compound, lotus ponds and koi ponds catching light. Rice is cultivated on the valley floor. A mountain stream runs through stone channels beneath and around the main buildings, its voice constant. In summer, the sheltered valley traps heat, but the stream and the wind through the bamboo are steady companions. In spring, cherry blossoms drift across the paving stones as one approaches the *sanmon* gate. The mountains are cloaked in *sugi* (Japanese cedar) and the native *tsubaki* (camellia) with its glossy

leaves and waxy flowers. These plants were familiar to me from my past work as a landscape architect in the eastern United States and offered a comforting sense of familiarity and connection.

Dogen zenji wrote in the *Eihei Kōroku*: “Sitting as the night gets late, sleep not yet arrived, / Ever more I realize engaging the way is best in mountain forests. / Sound of valley streams enters my ears; moonlight pierces my eyes. / Other than this, not a thought’s in my mind.¹” I read those lines for years before sitting in the valley that holds Toshōji. Being there, I understood them differently — not as a metaphor but as a description of a state of being-awareness that the place itself supports. In the *Keisei Sanshoku*, Dogen zenji wrote that “the sound of valley streams is the universal long broad tongue; the shape of the mountains is no other than the unconditioned body.” The mountains at Toshōji are not merely a backdrop. The mountains are teaching.

Ango is the traditional three-month training intensive practiced in Soto Zen monasteries twice yearly. To enter *ango* is a particular kind of home-leaving — *shukke* — the deliberate setting aside of reputation and ambition and the familiar self that is organized around preference and comfort. Dogen zenji addressed his assembly directly: “Clouds and water brothers, you have departed far from your home villages and have forever put aside family and kin. Completely forget trying to control fame and fortune or right and wrong... first we must study the single affair of the ancient buddha ancestors. That is abiding in the mountains.²”

I arrived at Toshōji in October of 2022 to take part in *tō* (winter) *ango*. Standing before the *sanmon* gate, I was fulfilling a many-year aspiration to train in the land of our Soto ancestors, to experience the root of practice. My journey had begun years earlier, finding a way to leave home, family, and responsibilities for an extended residency in a Japanese monastery. I was concerned that my age (early 60s) and physical challenges (an aggressive form of arthritis) would be hindrances. At last, preparations were made, including a preliminary visit to Toshōji in 2020 to see the temple and pay my respects to Rev. Suzuki. We agreed that I would return in April for *ge* (summer) *ango*. As I sat at Haneda Airport, preparing to return to the U.S., buoyed by my visit to Toshōji and anticipating a return in a few months, I began to read news about a virus that was sweeping through Asia. COVID had arrived, and Japan would close to foreigners for two years. Through the efforts of many hands and hearts, I was eventually able to obtain a visa that allowed me, at last, to return on that October day in 2022 and take part in the first of my two *angos* in this ancient home of Zen.

The daily schedule at Toshōji begins before dawn with *zazen*, then *chōka* (morning service). Practice during the day is marked by *nitchū* (noon service) and *banka* (evening service), as the formal movements of practice flow through the day, ending with more *zazen*. *Samu* — work practice — fills the hours between: cleaning, cooking, and maintaining the grounds. During winter, the sangha’s work practice includes efforts to provide warmth within the walls of the ancient buildings. This

means splitting wood and replenishing the firewood supply for the stoves in the *sōdō* and kitchen and maintaining other heating units in the common areas. In summer, work in the temple's vegetable gardens is an essential part of work practice. Cultivating the vegetable fields, we were kept company by numerous *gorintō*, the memorial stupas of long-deceased monks. Their presence within the vegetable garden and along the mountain paths was silent, intimate, a reminder of those who sustained Toshoji, their practice home, through the centuries. Often, I made a practice of offering flowers from the mountains at various memorial stupas during an afternoon or evening walk. The day's meals are taken in *oryoki*, the formal bowls, with a precise choreography of unfolding, receiving, and expressing gratitude. There is no part of the day that falls outside the practice.



What shapes you is not any single element but all of them together; the forms themselves are teachers. Each bow has a particular depth. Each bell is struck in a particular way. Being shaped by the sangha is equally real: sleeping and sitting and eating and working in close quarters with people from many countries, all

holding the same forms, all sometimes failing and trying again. The net of community practice holds what no individual could hold alone. Precious friendships are formed that endure, a web of community that encloses the globe, transcending national boundaries.

With an older body, prostrations require modification. *Samu* involves physical labor, which the back meets with its own opinions. This very body becomes a teacher as surely as the abbot does. When I could not do everything as prescribed, I encountered something instructive: non-grasping, not as concept but as necessity. The physical pain did not disappear, but my relationship to it changed. Continuing was possible moment by moment, when it seemed impossible as a whole.

The mind has its own resistances. The small self balks at being one among many, at following every instruction without negotiation, at surrendering the autonomy that defines ordinary life outside of the *sōdō*. The *ango* does not resolve these frictions so much as make them workable, and the intimacy of sangha sustains you in the moments you cannot sustain yourself.

As a Western-trained priest serving a small urban sangha, the question of roots is never far from mind. In the West, we often practice in rented spaces, in cities built on different lands with their own unique histories, carrying a tradition that came to us through translation, adaptation, and the devotion of teachers who made long crossings from Japan to the United States. This is authentic and generative practice,

but it is, inevitably, practice at some distance from the source.

To practice *ango* at Toshoji is not to romanticize Japan or to claim that the tradition belongs more fully to any particular geography. It is something more specific: actual contact. The same bowl. The same bow. The same bell. The same form of sitting has been practiced in these mountains for centuries. As someone shaped by Western practice, I could feel how many changes have been made to the forms of monastic training as they are now lived in Europe and North America, adjustments that have allowed the tradition to take root but that also soften some of its sharp edges. Being physically present in the ancestors' homeland brought me closer to the source; reverence and devotion arose there, less encumbered by my expectations about what *ango* practice should feel like or what I ought to be learning. I noticed, too, that the American tendency to ask "why" in response to instruction slowly shifted to "how," and then, more quietly, to a simple response, the body and mind moving in harmony with the form rather than reacting against it.

One aspect of *ango* practice at Toshoji was profound, especially for a Western-trained priest: that of living in the *sōdō*. Each monk is allotted one *tatami* that becomes "home." Here, *zazen*, meals, and sleep occur communally, with little or no privacy, and are deeply rooted in the traditional practice of Soto monastic training. At first this was destabilizing. Over time, this led to many reflections on what "home" actually means, how to respect the

dwelling space of my fellow monks, and how to supportively share this precious experience.



Takuhatsu, the embodied practice of alms rounds, is not often enacted in the West. During my training at Toshoji, we performed *takuhatsu* on three occasions, twice in winter and once in summer. As we walked, we intoned the word "*ho*" (dharma) loudly and continuously. Householders and shopkeepers came out to greet us. I noticed that many were elderly and seemed familiar with the practice of placing money or envelopes into our bowls. I treasure a particularly touching recollection of a young woman who gestured to us to wait at her doorway. She disappeared into her house and, a few moments later, returned holding the arm of a much older woman (I later learned this was her grandmother), who gently placed an envelope in my begging bowl, and we bowed to one another. Tears still appear as I recall this moment of connection across geography and time. After receiving an offering, our group would chant *Hannya Shingyō* to express our

gratitude, and then continue our rounds. The experience of *takuhatsu* is a complete expression of the oneness of “giver, receiver, and gift.”

The two *angos* I sat at Toshoji were practice in discovering that home is not somewhere else. Dogen zenji wrote: “But do not ask me where I am going, / As I travel in this limitless world, / Where every step I take is my home.”³

Following the ceremony in the *sōdō* when new monks enter the community, I had a brief, private welcome meeting with *dōchō roshi* (Rev. Suzuki). He kindly inquired if I had adequate clothing for Toshoji’s famously cold winters. At the conclusion of the meeting, he said, “Everything you need is here.” Initially, I understood his statement as referring to the material support needed: food, shelter, and warm clothing. But *dōchō roshi*’s words held more subtle, important practice guidance. Everything I needed to immerse completely in the experience of *ango* far away from home in a distant country — my anxiety, resistance, homesickness, and physical discomfort — was “here.” These things had traveled with me to Toshoji. But what was also “here” was my heart’s aspiration and the support of the community of practitioners from around the globe that coalesced into one body, a sangha dedicated to traveling the ancient way together, day after day, in this ancient mountain temple.

What I carried back to my home and temple in America was not technique or information. It was something harder to name: a sense of embodied continuity with the ancestors, a confirmation that this practice works, that the

roots hold, that the mountains are still walking.



¹ Dogen, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, trans. Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 639.

² Dogen, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, trans. Taigen Dan Leighton and Shohaku Okumura (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004), 474 .

³ Dogen, *The Zen Poetry of Dogen: Verses from the Mountain of Eternal Peace*, trans. Steven Heine (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1997), 61.



A Biography of Ejo Zenji, Second Abbot of Eihei-ji (Part 3)

Rev. Kenshu Sugawara
Professor, Aichi Gakuin University

VII. The Dharma Exchange with Dogen zenji upon His Return from Study in China

After descending from Mount Hiei, Ejo zenji studied under Shoku Shonin of the Pure Land school and under Kakuan Shonin of the Daruma school. Under Kakuan in particular, he reached the point of being recognized as having attained *kenshō* (seeing one's nature) through a passage from the *Surangama Sutra*. It was in the midst of this period that he heard of Dogen zenji's return from study in China. The *Sansō Gyōgyōki* (*Record of the Activities of the Third Ancestor*), "Chapter on the Second Ancestor Ejo zenji," states:

When Ejo zenji heard that Dogen zenji had transmitted the Buddha dharma from China and entered Kennin-ji temple (in the Higashiyama district of Kyoto), he went to engage him in Dharma dialogue and debate. Finding Dogen zenji's understanding to be of exceptional quality, he took refuge in him wholeheartedly.

Regarding the circumstances of Ejo zenji's first Dharma dialogue with Dogen zenji, Keizan zenji provides a detailed account in the *Denkōroku*:

In the first year of the Antei era (1227), Dogen zenji returned to Kennin-ji, where he

was engaged in practice. Word had reached others that he was quietly spreading the true Dharma that he had transmitted from China. Upon hearing this, Ejo zenji thought to himself: "I have already mastered everything there is to know through the teaching of the Three Stoppings and Three Contemplations [the Tendai method of zazen], I have attained the essential teaching of the Pure Land school, and I have also studied at Tonomine [under Kakuan of the Daruma school], where I gained deep insight into the import of seeing one's nature and attaining Buddhahood. What further teaching could possibly be transmitted [by Dogen zenji] from China?" He resolved, nonetheless, to pay a visit to Kennin-ji as a test and to question Dogen zenji directly.

At their first meeting, over the course of two or three days, the content of what Dogen zenji said was the same as what Ejo zenji had already attained. He spoke of seeing one's nature and the luminous awareness of spirit. Ejo zenji, finding nothing in this teaching to contradict what he had received, thought, "What I have attained until now was the truth." His reverence only deepened. But then, after several more days had passed, Dogen zenji presented a view entirely different from before. Ejo zenji was taken aback and attempted to argue against it. Yet he came to see that the truth lay outside himself, and that Dogen zenji's view was in no way similar to his own.

And so he resolved to serve under Dogen zenji and receive his instruction. But Dogen zenji said: "I have transmitted the style of this school and wish to spread it throughout

Japan for the first time. Though I am presently at Kenninji, I intend to choose another place and settle there. Therefore, if I am able to find such a place and establish a hermitage, come to me then. I cannot accept a disciple here.” Ejo zenji, in accordance with this instruction, resigned himself to wait for the right time.

— *Denkōroku* (Record of the Transmission of Illumination, “Chapter Fifty-two”)

From this account we can see that for the first two or three days, Ejo zenji and Dogen zenji were in agreement, speaking in particular of “seeing one’s nature and luminous awareness” (*kenshō reichi*). This phrase refers to penetrating one’s own fundamental nature and further awakening to the luminous awareness at the depths of one’s own mind. However, Dogen zenji later came to identify this notion of *reichi* with the view of “the Senika heresy” (a Brahmin named Śreṇika who, according to Fascicle 39 of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, argued for the existence of a substantial self and debated with the World-Honored One about this) — that is, as a non-Buddhist view — and criticized it in works such as the “Talk on Pursuing the Way” (*Bendowa*) and the “This Mind Itself Is the Buddha” (*Soku-shin-ze-butsu*) fascicles of the *Shobogenzo*. It is unclear to what degree Ejo zenji was conscious of this during the dialogue with Dogen zenji, but it may be inferred that at least partway through their exchange, he became clearly aware that this was a view to be criticized, and that the conversation shifted in an entirely different direction.

Ejo zenji, deeply moved by Dogen zenji’s understanding, wished to serve and learn under

him. However, since Dogen zenji was staying at Kenninji only temporarily, he instructed Ejo zenji to wait until he had established his own temple and so Ejo zenji waited for that time.

VIII. Ejo zenji Comes to Study under Dogen zenji at Koshoji

The initial Dharma exchange between Ejo zenji and Dogen zenji is thought to have taken place either within the same year, the first year of Antei (1227), or not long thereafter. Following this meeting at Kenninji, Ejo zenji had been instructed to wait, and that period extended to more than six years. During this interval, Tonomine, where the Daruma school in which Ejo zenji had been training was based, was attacked and burned by the warrior-monks of Kofukuji, with nearly the entire mountain destroyed. The area around Kyoto also suffered through the “Kangen Famine” of 1230–31, considered the most devastating disaster of the Kamakura period. Dogen zenji, too, was in search of a suitable place to settle, and as recorded in the *Sansō Gyōgyōki* — “Among the candidate sites offered by donors with whom there was a connection, I looked briefly at twelve locations; whether distant or near to the capital, none suited me.” He was traveling to various places during this time.

In the first year of Tenpuku (1233), Dogen zenji settled at Kannon Dori-in, near Gokurakuji in the Fukakusa district of Kyoto. Upon hearing of this, Ejo zenji traveled to Fukakusa in the winter of the first year of Bunryaku (1234) and came to study under Dogen zenji. The following year, on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, he received from Dogen zenji the “Precepts Authentically Transmitted by the Buddhas and

Ancestors” (*busso shōden kaihō*). This ceremony, it is said, was the same as the one in which Bodhidharma, the First Ancestor of Chinese Zen, had transmitted the precepts to the Second Ancestor, Huike. On the same day — though this is a separate matter — a monk named Rikan, who appears likely to have been a Tendai priest, also received the precepts from Dogen zenji; the “Precept Lineage Bestowed upon Rikan” (*Ju Rikan Kaimyaku*) the document attesting to this is preserved at Eihei-ji. From its contents, it appears that to Rikan, Dogen zenji transmitted the Linji school’s Huanglong lineage — descended from Zen Master Myōzen, his own teacher of record — while to Ejo zenji he most likely transmitted the precepts of the Soto school. The phrase “authentically transmitted by the buddhas and ancestors” (*busso shōden*) allows some inference about the nature of the precepts Ejo zenji received, though the actual content remains unknown.

IX. The Great Awakening of Ejo zenji

Three years after Ejo zenji had come to study under him (according to the *Denkoroku*), in the first year of Katei (1235), Dogen zenji took up the exchange concerning “one thread passing through many holes” (*ichimō sen shūketsu*) as an instruction offered to Ejo zenji as a request for a beneficial teaching from the master. This exchange is preserved as Case 85 of the first volume of the *Mana Shobogenzo* (a collection of three hundred classical kōan), for which Dogen zenji wrote a preface in that same year of Katei:

One day, the head monk, Quanming of Xuzhou, asked Master Shishuang:

“When one thread passes through many

holes, what then?”

The Master said: “That would take ten thousand years.”

Quanming said: “After ten thousand years, what then?”

Master Shishuang said: “Passing the examination is left to you; being selected is left to you.” (remainder omitted)

This is an exchange between Shishuang Qingshu (807–888, a disciple of Daowu Yuanzhi) and the head monk Quanming of Xuzhou, in which his question was: “When one thread passes through many holes, what then?” Upon hearing these words, Ejo zenji immediately experienced great awakening (*daigo*) and prostrated himself before Dogen zenji.

Dogen zenji asked: “Having made prostrations, what has happened?” Ejo zenji replied: “I have no question about the single thread. What I ask is: what are the many holes?” Dogen zenji smiled and confirmed: “The threading is complete.” Ejo zenji made prostrations and withdrew. Dogen zenji was greatly pleased and recognized Ejo zenji as his “true Dharma heir.” Regarding Ejo zenji’s great awakening, Keizan zenji offers the following interpretation in the *Denkorōku*:

As for the meaning of the phrase “one thread passing through many holes,” Ejo zenji from the outset did not ask about the “one thread,” but asked, “What are the many holes?” This signifies that not the slightest trace of discriminative thought arose in Ejo zenji’s mind, and not a single dharma came into being. Hence the ancients said: “on the ground of ultimate truth, not a single particle

of dust is admitted.” In a place of thorough clarity and emptiness, not a single hair sprouts. Ejo zenji had realized that very state. At that moment, Dogen zenji confirmed the realization, saying: “The threading is complete.”

— *Denkōroku* (Record of the Transmission of Illumination), “Chapter Fifty-two”

When Ejo zenji had been recognized as having attained *kenshō* and buddhahood under Kakuan of the Daruma school, Kakuan had declared that the beginningless ignorance had been entirely shed. But under Dogen zenji, Ejo zenji — like Dogen zenji himself — attained the state of *shinjin datsuraku*, the dropping away of body and mind, and it was this that was confirmed with the words: “The threading is complete.” (To be continued.)



My Footnotes on Zazen (31) The Five Hindrances That Cover Zazen - Five Hindrances Theory (2)

Rev. Issho Fujita

(Continued from the previous installment)

In Buddhism generally, the five hindrances are understood to be: the hindrance of sensual desire, the hindrance of ill will, the hindrance of dullness-and-drowsiness, the hindrance of restlessness-and-worry, and the hindrance of doubt. Nyojo zenji, however, added to these a sixth — the hindrance of ignorance — and spoke of “six hindrances.” Moreover, he attributed particular importance to this hindrance of ignorance, saying: “Simply remove the hindrance of ignorance, and the five hindrances will be removed along with it; but if one departs from the five hindrances yet cannot depart from the hindrance of ignorance, that cannot yet be called the practice-and-realization of the buddhas and ancestors.” Being of limited learning, I know of no one else who has taught in this way — and Dogen zenji did as well — so I take this to be an interpretation unique to Nyojo zenji.

Before examining the specific content of each of the five hindrances in turn, let us look at a passage from the Pali canon in which the Buddha, using two skillful similes, explains the impact the five hindrances have on the mind. This will serve as a valuable reference for understanding the five hindrances.

In the first simile, the Buddha addresses how

the five hindrances obscure our perception, drawing on the image of a clear pond that reflects one's form on its surface. When the hindrance of sensual desire (greed) is present in the mind, it is as though the pond has been filled with colored dye — the hindrance of sensual desire tints and colors our perception. When the hindrance of ill will (anger) is present, it is as though the water of the pond is boiling — one can no longer see the reflected image clearly. When the mind is heated with anger, our minds are in a state of “a violent storm.” When the hindrance of dullness-and-drowsiness (sinking of mind) is present, it is as though the pond is overgrown with excessive algae — there is a stagnation and murkiness in the mind that prevents us from seeing things clearly. The hindrance of restlessness-and-worry (agitation of mind) is like the water of the pond being churned and stirred by the wind — the mind is roused and tumbles about in utter confusion. The hindrance of doubt is likened to muddy water — one cannot see the bottom, and everything becomes unclear.

In the second simile, the Buddha describes the emotional quality of being in the grip of each of the five hindrances and then describes what it feels like to be freed from them. The emotional state of being seized by the hindrance of sensual desire is likened to taking out a loan in order to start a business; the state of being liberated from it is compared to the joy and happiness one feels when the business succeeds, all the debts are repaid, and there is even money left over to support one's family. The emotion of being in the grip of the hindrance of ill will is like the feeling of being ill — when food does not agree with

one's body and one's strength is declining; liberation from the hindrance of ill will is likened to recovering from illness, finding that food agrees with one again, regaining one's strength, and being filled with joy and happiness. The emotion of being seized by the hindrance of dullness-and-drowsiness is like being imprisoned; upon release, it is as though one has emerged from prison into safety and stability, without loss of one's property, and is filled with joy and happiness. The feeling of being in the grip of the hindrance of restlessness-and-worry is compared to being enslaved — dependent on another, unable to go where one wishes; when freed from it, it is like having escaped from slavery, standing independent and self-sufficient, dependent on no one, free to go wherever one wishes, and filled with joy and happiness. The feeling of being seized by the hindrance of doubt is compared to a person of wealth and property who has set out on a road through the desert; once freed from it, one has safely crossed the desert, lost none of one's wealth, and is overflowing with joy and happiness.

I believe these two similes convey a general picture of each of the five hindrances. From here, let us examine the substance of each hindrance in greater detail and inquire how to engage with them in *zazen*.

Five Steps for Working with the Hindrance of Sensual Desire

As I mentioned earlier, the five hindrances are one of the many names for what we ordinarily call *bonnō* — those “various mental functions, qualities, and states that trouble and

disturb body and mind, preventing them from coming to stillness.” Buddhism has devoted long years to the analysis and elucidation of these *bonnō*, and so a great many alternative names have been given to them. Among those names are *waku* (惑delusion), *zuimin* (随眠latent tendencies), *ten* (纏entanglements), *ketsu* (結fettters), *yaku* (軛yokes), *shu* (取clinging), *baku* (縛bonds), *ro* (漏outflows), *bōru* (暴流torrents)... and many more besides — with *gai* (hindrances) being just one among them. As their Chinese characters suggest, each of these various names was devised by focusing on a particular attribute of *bonnō*.

For example, *zuimin* — “latent tendencies” — is so called because “*bonnō* follow (*zui*) and work upon sentient beings (*ujō*), and the nature of their activity is subtle and difficult to discern, as though one were asleep (*min*)” (from Yokoyama Kōichi, *Yuishiki Bukkyō Jiten*, Shunjūsha). *Ten* (entanglements) is so named because *bonnō* cling to and envelop the mind; *ketsu* (fettters) because *bonno* bind the mind, bind it to suffering, and poison it; *yaku* (yoke) because *bonnō* obstruct liberation, like a yoke about the neck; and *bōru* (torrents) because *bonnō* are like the raging current of a wild river.

Corresponding to these differing ways of understanding *bonnō*, the number of types varies as well: the three poisons (*san-waku*: greed, hatred, delusion), the seven latent tendencies (*nana-zuimin*), the eight (or ten) entanglements (*hachi-* or *jū-ten*), the four torrents (*shi-bōru*), the four clingings (*shi-shu*) and so on. When *bonnō* are understood as “hindrances” — things that cover over — they are classified into

five, hence “five hindrances.”

In ordinary daily conversation, we often say things like, “I just can’t seem to let go of my *bonnō* — it’s a real problem,” or “He’s a person full of *bonnō*, so it’s best not to get involved with him.” We speak as though *bonnō* were personal

“possessions.” *Bonnō* are imagined as things one could discard if one only put one’s mind to it, or as things some people simply have more of, in greater quantity, than others. And having a great many of them is seen as entirely the individual’s own “failure,” “responsibility,” or “fault.” Hence “practice” is understood as something done in order to “reduce” them or “bring them to zero.” But are *bonnō* truly things that belong to individuals in this way? There is a need to step back and re-examine what Buddhism actually teaches about *bonnō*, beyond the conventional, popular understanding and imagery.

Japan is a country with a long Buddhist history, and precisely because of this, many words of Buddhist origin have become embedded in everyday language and are used naturally in ordinary conversation. Yet it is often the case that understandings far removed from the original meaning — what one might fairly call misunderstandings or distortions — are more widely current in the world. Even monks, most likely, unknowingly understand many Buddhist terms in their popularly accepted sense rather than their proper one. If Buddhism is, in a sense, aimed at a critique of received opinion — at the dismantling and deconstruction of common understanding — then this is a serious matter that must be clearly recognized. I believe something of this kind has happened with *bonnō*, one

of the most important terms in all of Buddhism.

But let us set that aside for now and return to our starting point: the passage in the *Hōkyōki* (*Baoqing Records*) in which, in the course of a dialogue between Dogen zenji and Nyojo zenji about zazen, *bonnō* are spoken of in terms of the five hindrances. In the practice of zazen, a crucial point to establish from the outset is that however the five hindrances arise during sitting, they are not to be evaluated — in moral terms or by worldly standards of value — as the sitter’s “failure,” “responsibility,” “fault,” “stain,” “mistake,” or “shame.” What is essential is not to suppress the *bonnō* that manifest as the five hindrances on the basis of such evaluations, not to meet them with anger, and not to blame oneself for them.

Dogen zenji’s *Fukanzazengi* contains the words “*fushizen-fushiaku*” (do not think good or bad) and “*zehi o kansuru koto nakare*” (do not judge right or wrong). In zazen, we must find a middle way of meeting *bonnō* — neither becoming lost in them nor suppressing them. This is something altogether different from the hasty attitude that says, “*Bonnō* just need to be cleared away, and that’s that.” Rather than trying to swiftly dispatch troublesome *bonnō* by means of some technique, the proper attitude is to face *bonnō* honestly, to learn from them carefully, and to understand them deeply. To simply condemn *bonnō* as bad and attempt to excise them from one’s interior — the way a surgeon physically removes cancerous cells — in hopes that one will thereby be freed from them, is not a Buddhist approach.

I believe that the revolutionary character of Buddhism lies in the fact that Shakyamuni Buddha approached *bonnō* from a paradigm entirely different from previous religious traditions. Rather than making an enemy of *bonnō* and attacking them, rather than turning his back on *bonnō* and fleeing from them, he stopped, settled himself, and patiently sought to learn from *bonnō* themselves — asking, “What is the true nature of *bonnō*?” In his approach, one senses not revulsion toward *bonnō* but something approaching reverence. Rather than fighting or fleeing, Shakyamuni found the path beyond *bonnō* through deep understanding of them.

Now let us turn to an examination of the first of the five hindrances — the hindrance of sensual desire. In this consideration, the *Mahāsati-paṭṭhāna Sutta* (Greater Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), which occupies a place of supreme importance in the Southern Buddhist tradition, will serve as a valuable reference. This sutta teaches that wisdom is established and nirvana is entered through the cultivation of four contemplations: (1) contemplation of the body, (2) contemplation of feelings/sensations, (3) contemplation of mind, and (4) contemplation of mental objects. (As Katayama Kazuyoshi translates it: “Monks, this is the one-way path for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realization of nirvana — that is, the four foundations of mindfulness.” From Katayama Kazuyoshi, *Pāri Bukkyō ni Budda no Zenjō wo Manabu* — “*Mahāsati-paṭṭhāna Sutta*” *wo Yomu*, Daihōrin-kaku.)

The very first item listed under the contemplation of mental objects is the contemplation of the five hindrances, which is taught as follows: “And how, monks, does a monk dwell continuously observing phenomena in phenomena? Here, monks, a monk dwells continuously observing phenomena in phenomena with regard to the five hindrances. And again, how, monks, does a monk dwell continuously observing phenomena in phenomena with regard to the five hindrances?” (Katayama, *ibid.*) I suspect — though I cannot offer documentary evidence and can only speculate — that the contemplation of the five hindrances as developed in the *Mahāsaṭṭipatthāna Sutta* is in some way connected with Nyojo zenji’s touching on the matter of the five hindrances in his reply to Dogen zenji’s questions about zazen. The comparison of the *Mahāsaṭṭipatthāna Sutta* with zazen is itself a fascinating topic.

Here the Buddha sets forth five steps for working with each of the five hindrances. Let us examine them in relation to the hindrance of sensual desire. This hindrance is the grasping after the six sense objects — forms, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and mental objects — that correspond to the six sense faculties. There is perhaps no need to elaborate further: it is the thought of “I want—” in all its forms and intensities. Within zazen, it may appear as absorption in inner dramas and stories — tragedies with oneself as protagonist, romance, tales of advancement or success — or it may take the form of a kind of expectation, a hoping that something other than what is actually happening will come along. In zazen, what may appear to be pure awareness of pain or

discomfort is, in many cases, actually a feeling of pain or discomfort colored by the anticipation that it will go away; or one’s awareness of pleasure may be accompanied by a subtle, concealed expectation that it will continue a little longer. Within zazen, such subtle forms of craving — which do not at first glance appear to be craving at all — arise frequently, and so it is necessary to cultivate a refined capacity for insight into the various ways in which craving manifests. The five steps for working with craving as taught by the Buddha are as follows:

- ① If sensual desire is present within, one knows: “Sensual desire is present within me.”
- ② If sensual desire is not present within, one knows: “Sensual desire is not present within me.”
- ③ One knows how sensual desire that has not yet arisen comes to arise.
- ④ One knows how sensual desire that has already arisen is abandoned.
- ⑤ One knows how sensual desire that has been abandoned does not arise again in the future.

These five steps are exactly the same for each of the other four hindrances as well — one need only substitute “ill will,” “dullness-and-drowsiness,” “restlessness-and-worry,” and “doubt” in place of “sensual desire” above.

(To be continued)

NEWS

April 14, 2026

South America Soto Zen Conference was held via Zoom.

April 23, 2026

Europe Soto Zen Conference was held via Zoom.

May 6~14, 2026

Baika classes by Sotoshu Specially Dispatched Baika Teacher were held at 5 places in Hawaii.

May 14~23, 2026

Baika classes by Sotoshu Specially Dispatched Baika Teacher were held at 6 places in South America.

June 20~28, 2026

Baika classes by Sotoshu Specially Dispatched Baika Teacher were held at 8 places in North America.

July 26.27, 2026

Dharma talks by Sotoshu Specially Dispatched Teacher were held via Zoom in South America.

SOTO ZEN JOURNAL is published semiannually by the Soto Zen Buddhism International Center

Please address all inquiries or comments to: Soto Zen Buddhism International Center
1691 Laguna Street, San Francisco, CA 94115 Phone: 415-567-7686 Fax: 415-567-0200