

# Sermons

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## **Sutras - Volumes of the Sutras are the Tathagata's Total Body by Rev. Juko Nakano**

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In India the leaves of a "tala tree," a member of the palm family, were dried out and cut to a length of around 40 to 50 centimeters, and on these leaves characters were inscribed. The leaves were then strung together with a thread. Such a collection of leaves was called a "sutra." This method had been used as a means to keep the key points of religious doctrines in a concise manner already before the Shakyamuni Buddha's time. This was adopted by Buddhism, and these sutras became known as a collection of the Buddha's teachings. The word "sutra" is derived from the ancient language, Sanskrit, meaning "warp thread" and "string." When Buddhism was transmitted to China, the Buddha's teachings were translated into Chinese, with the character for sutra becoming "經" (pronounced *kyo* in Japanese). This character has the meanings of "warp thread" and "path." In this way, the Buddha's teachings written down in the sutras became known as "*o-kyo*" (venerable scriptures) and "*kyo-ten*" (scriptural texts) with the passing of time, and this has continued in Japan as well.

Shakyamuni Buddha attained awakening at the age of 35 and passed away at 80, and during the 45 years between these two events he continued his pilgrimage, passing on his teachings (Buddha's teachings). During his journeys, Shakyamuni Buddha passed on many teachings. Immediately after he passed away, his disciples gathered around to take part in discussions to ultimately confirm what these teachings were. These meetings came to be known as the "Buddhist Councils" (*Ketsuju*).

The First Buddhist Council was held in Rajagriha in Magadha, India. It is said that 500 of his disciples had gathered for this event. Here, Shakyamuni Buddha's closest attendant, Ananda, recited from memory the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha while a great many disciples compared this to what they heard to compile a definitive version of the teachings.

There is a story from this event. Ananda was the disciple that most often listened to Buddha's teachings because he always accompanied the Shakyamuni Buddha at his side. This led to him being called the disciple that "heard most." When the First Buddhist Council was called, everyone believed Ananda was to be ideally suited to establish a definitive version of the Buddha's teachings. However, the Buddha's most revered disciple, Mahakaashyapa, did not permit Ananda to attend the council on the grounds that he had not yet achieved awakening. It has been said that the reasons why Ananda, the disciple who heard most, had not attained enlightenment were because, as the attendant of the Shakyamuni Buddha, he had not spent a lot of time absorbing himself in his own practice. And also because he had listened too much to the Buddha's teachings and had become satisfied with simply listening to his teachings. It has been also said that Ananda felt a strong sense of responsibility. For this reason, he agonized and practiced desperately. When he rested his head on his pillow in utter exhaustion on the night before the council, he finally attained the eye of wisdom and achieved awakening. If it was not for Ananda, Buddha's teachings may not have come into being. Most sutras begin with the words, "*Nyo Ze Ga Mon* (Thus have I heard)." This is how Ananda recounted the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, meaning "this is how I heard it."

Following the first Buddhist Council, this kind of Buddhist Council was convened a few more times to create the original form of the scriptures we see today. These scriptures that try to convey the teachings of the Shakyamuni Buddha are referred to as the "Eighty-four thousand Dharma-gates." Today, this has been turned into a massive collection of teachings by the followers of the Buddha referred to as the "*Issai-kyo* (Complete Collection of Scriptures)," and "*Daizo-kyo* (Great Collection of Scriptures)." The Mahayana Buddhist movement arose before the Common Era. This movement called for Buddhist practitioners to specifically put into practice what is preached in the teachings of the Shakyamuni Buddha. Through this emerged many more scriptures. These sutras were created after the death of Shakyamuni Buddha, and as such do not directly convey the words of Shakyamuni Buddha. Even so, the hopes and prayers contained in these sutras attempted to convey the spirit of the Buddha's teachings in the correct manner. They do not deviate from the intent to pass on the truth that the Buddha himself attained through awakening.

The scriptures were established to convey and spread the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. Therefore, the act of learning and familiarizing oneself with the scriptures is nothing other than coming into contact with the spirit of Shakyamuni Buddha.

There is a verse to recite before opening scriptures called "*Kaikyo-ge* (Sutra-Opening Verse)":

Mu jo jin jin mi myo ho

hyaku sen man go nan so gu  
ga kon ken mon toku ju ji  
gan ge nyo rai shin jitsu gi.

(English translation):

The unsurpassed, profound, and wondrous dharma is rarely met with,  
Even in a hundred, thousand, million kalpas.  
Now we can see and hear it, accept and maintain it.  
May we unfold the meaning of the Tathagata's truth.

The meaning of this is quoted from the "*Sotoshu Danshinto Hikkei*" (Handbook for Sotoshu Members and Followers.):

"The sutras have an extremely profound and subtle holiness that cannot be expressed in words or letters. Encountering these holy sutras is not something that can be achieved even after billions of years of attempting to do so. Even so, we can take up these sutras in our own hands, look upon them with our own eyes and hear them with our own ears. How rare and blissful this is. No matter how much we strive and endure, we must embody the rarity and holiness of the sutras. We must respectfully receive them sutras in our hearts and minds, strongly aspiring for them to become our own lives."

*Kaikyo* literally means "untying the thread to the text of a sutra and opening it." *Gemon* (the verse text) is the expression of the joy of being able to come into contact with the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha and also the vow to make them our own way of life.

Dogen Zenji, who founded the Daihonzan Eihei-ji, one of the head temples of Sotoshu, in Fukui Prefecture, left the following teaching:

The volumes of the Sutras are the whole body of the Tathagata.  
To do prostrations to the volumes of the Sutras is to do prostrations to the Tathagata.  
To meet the volumes of the Sutras is to meet the Tathagata.  
(*Shobogenzo, Nyoraizenshin – The Storehouse of the True Dharma Eye, The Whole Body of the Tathagata*)

The volumes of the Sutras Dogen Zenji mentioned are no less than the scriptures themselves. It is taught that the volumes of Sutras found through these Scriptures are the Whole Body of the Tathagata. Doing prostrations to the volumes of the Sutras means to bow in respect to the Tathagata. Encountering the volumes of the Sutras is to look upon and worship the Tathagata.

When thinking of this, we are taught to view the scriptures as the Tathagata, in other words, the Buddha himself, as well as the sheer blessing of the opportunity presented to us to receive the scriptures. Supported by the faith of those who tried to disseminate the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, a great many difficulties have been overcome in spreading these teachings to the world through the scriptures. This was achieved through the great strength of conviction of the many followers who believed in the Shakyamuni Buddha's teachings and attempted to pass them on to others. We should not forget this.

Coming into contact with the Buddha's teachings today and receiving the scriptures as something to rely on in our everyday lives is to encounter the Shakyamuni Buddha through the scriptures. Shakyamuni Buddha teaches us to raise the heart of immeasurable compassion toward all sentient beings. We should connect with the spirit of Shakyamuni Buddha and correct our ways of living through the scriptures so that every day is a day spent in accordance with the spirit of the Shakyamuni Buddha.

Difficult is it to be born as a human being,  
Difficult is the existence of mortals,  
Difficult is it to hear the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings),  
Rare is the appearance of the Buddhas in the world.  
(*The Dhammapada*)