

About Soto Zen Liturgy

The main genres of Buddhist literature used in Soto Zen liturgy in Japan are: sutras (*kyō* 経), dharanis (*darani* 陀羅尼), treatises (*ron* 論), eko (*ekō mon* 回向文), and verses (*ge* 偈, *mon* 文). The scriptures in question are many in number, varied in literary form and derivation, and extremely rich and diverse in philosophical, ethical, and spiritual content. When chanted in the context of formal Zen ritual and practice, however, they have a limited number of functions that can be clearly distinguished.

Sutras are texts revered as sermons of the Indian Buddha, Shakyamuni. Those used in the Zen tradition are mainly Mahayana scriptures, such as the *Heart Sutra* and *Lotus Sutra*. They are written and recited in classical Chinese, albeit using Japanese phonetics (*on yomi* 音読み), which means that the chanting is incomprehensible to the average listener. Most well-educated Japanese can read classical Chinese to some extent, so the chanting may be understood if they also have a written text to follow or if, having memorized the text by chanting it many times, they can visually recall the Chinese characters as they are intoned. When sutras are studied, they are usually read in Japanese translation. While many of the teachings and beliefs expressed in them are very important in the Zen tradition, the main reason for chanting sutras in liturgical settings is not to broadcast their meaning but rather to produce spiritual merit (*kudoku* 功德) for subsequent ritual offering and dedication to a variety of beings and purposes. In some elaborate rites, merit is produced by “revolving reading” (*tendoku* 転読), which entails flipping through the pages of a long sutra without actually chanting the words.

Dharanis (also called mantras) are magical spells: strings of sounds that are deemed sacred and powerful, although they often have little or no discernible semantic value. Proper pronunciation of the sounds is deemed necessary for them to be effective. The classical Chinese characters in which the dharanis used in Soto liturgy are written were all selected for their phonetic values (not their meanings) as a device to transliterate (not translate) spells that were originally written and/or chanted in Indic languages. Japanese liturgical handbooks always include a pronunciation guide, written in the *kana* syllabary, that runs alongside the Chinese characters. Dharanis employ a mode of speech that is performative rather than communicative: they are believed to magically accomplish things, such as appeasing spirits or preventing disasters. But their main function in Soto liturgy, like sutras, is to produce merit for ritual dedication.

Treatises are commentaries on sutras or independent presentations of Buddhist doctrine attributed to eminent teachers other than the Buddha himself. Two treatises used regularly in Soto liturgy are the *Harmony of Difference and Equality*, by Shitou Xiqian (700–790), and the *Precious Mirror Samadhi*, by Dongshan Liangjie (807–869). These texts, originally written in classical Chinese, are recited in Japanese translation. When chanted in the context of ritual offerings to ancestral teachers (*soshi* 祖師), they serve the dual purposes of generating merit and honoring the authors, who belong to and are representative of the Soto Zen lineage. Two other treatises used in Soto liturgy are Dogen's *Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen*, and *The Meaning of Practice and Verification*, a modern compilation of passages taken

from his *Shōbōgenzō*. Although the former is written in Chinese, both works are chanted in classical Japanese. Their function in Soto liturgy is to commemorate Dogen, the founder of the Soto school in Japan, and to present a capsule summary of his most important teachings.

Eko are verses for transferring merit, written in classical Chinese but usually chanted in Japanese translation. The verses generally have two parts. The first states how the merit was generated (naming the particular texts chanted for that purpose), who it is to be transferred to, and the specific ends to which it is dedicated. The second part is a prayer that asks for something in exchange for the merit just given.

Verses are short poems, composed in classical Chinese, that express Buddhist ideals and values. Some, such as the *Formal Meal Verses*, *Bath Verse*, and *Face-Washing Verse*, are used in the context of Zen monastic training to sanctify and give religious meaning to otherwise mundane activities. They are always recited when and where the activity in question takes place, either by a group (as in the case of meals) or by individuals (as when entering the bath or toilet). Others verses, such as the *Three Refuges Verse*, *Four Vows*, *Repentance Verse*, and *Verse of Homage to Buddha's Relics*, are chanted as acts of commitment and worship in and of themselves. They are usually intoned by groups in conjunction with sutra-chanting and other services, but in essence their recitation is an individual act of devotion. The verses used in Soto liturgy are not unique to the Zen school; almost all derive from the Chinese Buddhist tradition at large. Most are chanted in the original classical Chinese word order, but a few

(such as the *Verse of Five Contemplations* recited at meals) are translated into and chanted in Japanese.

Among the most common settings in which texts are chanted in Soto monasteries and temples are the daily, monthly, and annual sutra-chanting services (*fugin* 諷經). These are rites in which spiritual merit (*kudoku* 功德) is first generated by chanting Buddhist sutras, dharanis, or treatises and then ritually transferred (*ekō* 回向) to various recipients who are named in a formal verse for transferring merit. Sutra-chanting services are used to make offerings of merit to a wide range of beings: the Buddha Shakyamuni; his immediate disciples, the arhats; the lineage of ancestral teachers through whom the Zen dharma has been transmitted; the two leading founders of the Soto Zen tradition in Japan, Dogen and Keizan; the founding abbot and other former abbots of particular monasteries; various dharma-protecting and monastery-protecting deities, including Indian devas, Chinese spirits, and Japanese kami; the ancestors of lay patrons of Soto temples; and hungry ghosts, denizens of hell, and various other benighted and suffering spirits. Particular sutra-chanting services are distinguished by (and sometimes named after) the main figures to whom merit is transferred, but it is common for a single service to include offerings to a number of ancillary or minor figures at the same time.

Other ritual settings in which texts are chanted to produce and dedicate merit include: monthly memorial services (*gakki* 月忌) for Dogen, Keizan, and the founding abbot of each monastery; annual memorial services (*nenki* 年忌) for them, other ancestors in the Soto Zen lineage, and lay patrons; funerals (*sōgi* 喪儀) for monks

and lay followers; and various routine and occasional recitation services (*nenjū* 念誦) and prayer services (*kitō* 祈禱).

All sutra-chanting, memorial, and funeral services are held before altars on which images or name tablets of the major recipients of the offerings are enshrined. The chanting that produces the merit is generally done in unison by all the monks (and sometimes laity) present at a service, whereas the *eko*, or verse for transferring the merit, is recited by a single person, a monastic officer known as the cantor (*ino* 維那). The oral performance in which merit is generated and transferred is often accompanied by other, more physical offerings at an altar, such as the burning of incense or the presentation of food and drink.

Recitation and prayer services are somewhat different in that the merit produced is dedicated not to individuals, but rather in support of specific benefits that are prayed for, such as recovery from illness, harmony in the community, or the success of a monastic retreat. There being no named recipients of offerings, such services need not be performed before an altar, but may be held in other places, such as an infirmary or meditation hall.

To summarize, the three most important ritual functions of Soto Zen liturgy are the production and dedication of merit, the commemoration of ancestral teachers, and the sanctification of routine activities in the daily lives of Zen practitioners. But regardless of how they are used in ritual settings, most of the texts that are chanted in Soto Zen services and practice can also be read for their meaning, as works of philosophy, ethics, and/or inspirational

religious literature. Far from being mutually exclusive, the various functions that the scriptures have are mutually supportive and enriching.

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