

Putting Dōgen on the Map

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(Great Master Dōgen is a key figure in the Serene Reflection Meditation tradition because he is the monk who brought the tradition from China to Japan in 1227. This article is an edited version of a talk about Dōgen’s background given at Throssel earlier this year. I am grateful to the people who kindly took the time to read through the article and for their helpful suggestions.)

As the influence and the power of the Buddhist church increased, its aims became more and more temporal. It began to interfere in political affairs; its abbots built in and around the capital or in the provinces great monasteries such as Mt Hiei, Koyasan, Miidera and others and filled them with armed monks; its prelates were involved in intrigues around the throne (it is possible that the removal of the capital from Nara to Kyoto may have been due to imperial fear of priestly statecraft); it even made attempts to establish direct ecclesiastical control over the state. The various sects too began to quarrel amongst themselves...Monastery fought monastery; sect fought sect; while the monks of Mt Hiei and other priestly strongholds trooped down so often in their thousands to overawe the capital that the Emperor Shirakawa once exclaimed [in 1198] ‘Three things there are which I cannot control—the river Kamo in flood, the fall of the dice, and the monks of Mt Hiei’¹.

The Political and Social Background

The Japan of 1200 into which Dōgen was born was in turmoil: political, social, moral and religious. The political power structure was complicated, consisting of an imperial court with

the Emperor, often being a young person, at the centre, and behind him the ex/retired Emperor who wielded the real power. The huge aristocratic court had been dominated over previous centuries by two of the largest families, notably the Fujiwaras. Towards the end of the 1100s two other prominent families had come into play; one of them, the Minamotos, was Dōgen's own family. There was a new rising military class who, although looked down on by the aristocrats, were the people actually involved in the frequent warfare. In 1185 the Minamotos had defeated their rivals in a big sea battle, and the head of the Minamotos, Yoritomo, became the effective controller over Japan by establishing a new feudal, military system of government at Kamakura. He was the first samurai who took political power. This was an epoch-making change in Japan's history. This new government ruled firmly and had its own council, home office, treasury, and supreme law court. Every province was assigned a constable, whose job it was to raise troops and keep order, and a land steward who collected taxes and superintended justice. Both officials were responsible to the Kamakura government, not to the Emperor or the estate-owners. Although there were effectively two government systems at work at the same time in Japan, the real one was the military one.

Yoritomo was so powerful that the Japanese Emperor gave him the title of *Shogun*, the equivalent of giving him permanent permission to ensure that the empire was defended and at peace. Although the title had occasionally been used in earlier centuries, it had been limited as to time and place. Now it amounted to a permanent mandate over the entire empire and marked a very significant shift of power to the warrior class. The predominant traits of those making up this class had little to do with chivalrous codes of behaviour or loyalty; rather, they are described as being very greedy, predatory and calculating in their business dealing. Except

at the Imperial Court in the capital Kyoto, the military men controlled all the administration and the social life of Japan. This fundamental shift happened within a few years. Further reforms by Yoritomo effectively doubled the size of the country by bringing in outlying areas and placing them under administrative and military control. For the Japanese of the time, the sense of what their country physically comprised, as well as by whom and how it was actually ruled, altered within a few years. Yoritomo died in 1199, after falling from his horse, and power then passed into the control of his wife's family (the Hojos); she assumed the title of Regent/effective ruler, with her family governing in the name of the puppet shogun.

The aristocracy that centred around the court in Kyoto was very large but had been in decline for some time. It was basically only interested in pursuing its own political interests, romantic adventures and poetic and artistic activities. This was possible because they had much free time. Over the previous centuries, the aristocratic families had built up huge holdings of tax-free estates, giving them enormous wealth which allowed them to lead a life of leisure. By 1200, rice was the staple crop for everyone in Japan and 80% of the land that rice could be grown on was included in the aristocratic-owned system. The land was regularly fought over by the aristocratic class and also, by 1200, the emerging, more powerful warrior class. The lives of the aristocracy were permeated with an awareness of beauty, and of sorrow. On the one hand, there was a sense of the incredible beauty of nature and aesthetic refinement of their lives; on the other, the recognition of its intrinsic impermanence. This aristocracy had much interest in religion, particularly Buddhism, but this was because of its aesthetic appeal, not its ethical dimension or practical application.

The third main social group comprised the craftsmen, merchants, farmers and peasants. Downtrodden—to them the aristocracy seemed corrupt and indifferent to their acute suffering. Living in a world of social and political upheaval, there were also frequent fires and earthquakes, regular famines and epidemics, and murders. Throughout all of Japanese society it had been widely believed that since 1052 they had been living in the ‘Age of Mappo’, and there was a general sense of apocalyptic crisis. There was a really deep sense of the wretchedness and pointlessness of human existence and of the inability of anybody, or any group of people, to do anything about it. In the lower classes, there was a real yearning for a new sense of spiritual direction; everything else seemed washed out.

The Buddhist Context

Japan’s first official contact with Buddhism had been in 540AD, when a small kingdom on the Chinese mainland had sought the Japanese Emperor’s military help. An ambassador sent to the Emperor presented him with a number of gifts, including a Buddha statue and some Buddhist books, along with a recommendation of Buddhism as a religion of the civilised world. The Japanese government was so ignorant of the religion that it actually did not know what to do with the gifts. They decided that a rising aristocrat named Soga, whose family was one of the greatest of the time, would conduct an experiment by worshipping the statue regularly, to see what happened. From that one act by a family so prominent, within a few decades Buddhism became the established church in Japan. Right from the beginning therefore, there was a very immediate and powerful connection between Buddhism and the Emperor, court and aristocracy. As early as 756, a handsome and ambitious monk named Dōkyō had influenced the young empress of the time to the point where he had become chan-

cellor and practically ruler of the empire; not content with that, he further spread a report that the Japanese ‘God of War’ wished him to be made Emperor himself!

By 1200, the Japanese Buddhist priesthood was very widespread and powerful. It had been antagonised in the decades prior to 1200 by various decrees aimed at diminishing its status. Yoritomo had managed to placate the priesthood by rescinding many of the decrees. There were huge Buddhist institutions in Japan: monasteries with thousands of monks which had built up vast, tax-free landholdings that continued to get larger as the neighbouring peasant-owned land continued to be absorbed. There was an advantage for the peasants in giving their land to the monasteries, because the latter paid no tax so could own the land and lease it back to the peasants, charging them a lower rent. Everybody was happy in the short term, but in the longer run this arrangement bred serious problems, as these huge estates needed to be defended from warriors, aristocrats and, sometimes, even other monasteries. These monastic estates were defended with armed monks and mercenaries. Since the mid-900s, some of the largest monasteries had standing armies and used them in conflicts with other monasteries or with the government, sometimes even completely destroying rival monasteries. Mt Hiei was where the young Dōgen began his monastic training and was one of the largest monastic complexes and is specifically described as having become “*a veritable fortress. If any ecclesiastical interest was at stake, armed forces used to descend into the capital Kyoto, which was nearby, to over-awe and intimidate the government.*”² The power, wealth and influence of established Buddhism continued to grow, whilst its moral, intellectual and religious basis was disintegrating to a dangerous point. The activities of the armed monks, and the obvious involvement in politics, added to people’s apocalyptic sense of

crisis; the monks' involvement had many sordid social and psychological implications.

Established Buddhism was very closely connected with the aristocracy. There were so many people in the ruling clan (the Fujiwaras) of the time that it was actually hard to get a decent job if you were a young man from that clan (Dōgen's own father had fourteen children). If you were a young male aristocrat wanting power, money, or influence in the political situation, the Buddhist priesthood was the fast-track alternative route to it. One of the consequences therefore was that many of the important positions, particularly in larger monasteries, were monopolised by such men. As a result, there were people from the imperial house and the Fujiwara family forming exclusive cliques within the monasteries and within the priesthood. The actual activities of a lot of these temples centred around the magical rituals and practices of esoteric Buddhism: Shingon, and some forms of Tendai³; all of which were designed to protect the well-being of Japan and the aristocracy. By the time Dōgen entered Mt Hiei in 1213, Buddhism had been so secularised that there was actually no distinction anymore between Buddhist law and secular law. Following the establishment of the Shogunate, to a great extent, the Buddhist hierarchies lost both their prestige and their political supporters at the imperial capital, and the mysteries and ceremonies were considerably discredited. One of the responses in the Buddhist world was a growing interest in Pure Land Buddhism. There were also pockets of reaction against both the established Buddhism and the Pure Land school. Monks and scholars were travelling to and from China—still seen as the great land of Buddhist practice—bringing back renewed, and also new, forms of Buddhism. The samurai warriors accepted Zen Buddhism; a number of Chinese Zen masters came to Japan from China (Rankei Doryu and Mugaku Sogen were two) and sev-

eral Zen temples were founded in Kamakura. The spiritual ideals of Zen Buddhism—of self-control and perseverance—appealed to warriors who had already faced the prospect of imminent death on the battlefield; as one source puts it: “*The Buddhism of the new age was one not of ceremonies and mysteries but a religion of simple piety or of spiritual exercise. Dogma gave way to personal experience, ritual and sacerdotalism to piety and intuition, and this new type of religion exerted its influence beyond class limits, exhibiting many democratic features.*”⁴ As training in Zen came more and more into vogue, there were many warrior statesmen with spiritual attainment, the Commissioner Tokiyori Hojo (who ruled 1246-56, during the last years of Dōgen’s life) being the most famous.

Dōgen’s Early Life and Ordination

Probably illegitimate, Dōgen (meaning ‘The Foundation of the Way’) was born into a decadent, over-refined, aristocratic background in the south-east district of the old imperial capital of Kyoto. His father was one of the Minamotos, a central figure in the politics of the time and deeply involved. He was so powerful that in 1198 he actually had his grandson installed as Emperor, whilst he himself became the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal (or Regent). Assuming control of the Imperial Court he could even, to a certain extent, keep the Shogun’s faction in place. Also a very literary man, he was regarded as without peer in the leading poetic circles of the time; an accomplishment which in itself carried enormous influence with the court aristocracy. He died abruptly in 1202, probably assassinated by rivals. Dōgen had 11 brothers and 3 sisters from his father’s side, all of whom were very highly trained, highly sophisticated, and very literary. Many of them occupied positions of considerable importance and influence in the court.

Dōgen's mother was Ishi, the third daughter of a Fujiwara. She was previously married to a very influential man in the Imperial Court, but after he was banished, she was offered by her father to Dōgen's father as a concubine. On the death of his father, Dōgen and Ishi moved to a small cottage in the suburbs of the capital of Kyoto, where life was described as very lonely and sad. Just before she died in the winter of 1208, Ishi begged Dōgen to become a monk: firstly, to pray for the well-being of his mother and father; secondly, to find the truth of Buddhism; and thirdly, to do everything he could to help reduce the suffering of all sentient beings. Dōgen had a sensitive, almost fragile mind, having been brought up and educated in a refined, aristocratic environment, and he was struck with profound grief at Ishi's death. As he watched the incense smoke rise from in front of his mother's coffin at her funeral, he had a deep experience of the impermanence of life. This made a very powerful impact on his young mind and he resolved to find the True Way, right there and then. He went to live with Nichitomo, Ishi's half-brother. Nichitomo was another Fujiwara and a famous composer of poems. At forty-one years of age, he did not have an heir and wanted to adopt Dōgen and groom him for a brilliant career in the aristocracy, which still had enormous influence and wealth. The young Dōgen was thoroughly educated in the classics of Japanese and Chinese literature. According to his oldest biography (the *Kenzei-ki*), Dōgen was already reading Chinese poetry by the time he was four; it says he studied unusually hard, encouraging his mind, and if he felt sleepy he is supposed to have pricked himself in his thigh with a needle to stay awake.⁵

At the age of nine Dōgen began to read Buddhist Sutras and commentaries and he liked them. Three years later Nichitomo announced the formal ceremony to initiate Dōgen into the first stage of aristocratic manhood and all the local aristocracy

were invited. This was a critical moment of choice for Dōgen; to have gone through with such a ceremony would have made it very hard for him to later back out of the path that it opened up. He decided he wanted to become a monk instead and he ran off to visit an uncle named Ryokan (not the famous later one who wrote the poems), who was another influential aristocrat. Dōgen asked his permission to become a monk, but Ryokan refused (at this time the Shogunate were vigorously suppressing the Pure Land schools of Buddhism). Dōgen was so persistent and sincere however, that Ryokan realised he really meant it and so eventually gave in. He took Dōgen to a small temple at the foot of Mt Hiei where he was introduced to the Abbot. Soon afterwards, a new Abbot called Koen took over. Dōgen was ordained and given the Bodhisattva Precepts on the Precept Platform at Enryaku-ji Temple on 9th April 1213. The Precepts he took are the same Precepts you and I take at ordination in our own Order; the commentary on them—the *Kyojūkaimon*⁶—was written by Dōgen too. From then on, he steeped himself in the study of the Scriptures, particularly those of the Tendai School, of which he was now a member. Mt. Hiei was particularly well-known for this approach. He learned his monastic rules and the monastic Precepts. As he continued his studies however, he met a problem which he could not solve: if, as many of the Scriptures he was reading said, people are originally enlightened, then why does anyone have to engage in religious practice? This became a fundamental problem and gnawed away at him. He visited other temples on Mt. Hiei and talked with the teachers, but felt no one gave him a good enough answer. He was also becoming disgusted with the greed of the monks and their constant quarrelling with each other, so when Koen died, Dōgen left Mt. Hiei to visit other masters in the area. “*Since I hadn’t met a true teacher nor any good co-practitioners, I became confused and evil thoughts arose. First of all, my teachers taught me that I*

should study as hard as our predecessors in order to become wise and to be known at the court, and famous all over the country. So when I studied the teachings I thought of becoming equal to the ancient wise people of this country, or to those who received the title of 'Daishi' ('Great Teacher'- an honorific title given by the Emperor). When I read...and learned about the lifestyles of eminent monks and followers of the Buddha-Dharma in Great China, they were different from what my teachers taught. I also began to understand that such a mind as I had aroused was despised and hated in all the sutras...and biographies...Having realized this truth, I considered those in this country with the title of 'Great Teacher' and so on as dirt or broken tiles. I completely reformed my former frame of mind..."

Miidera was another huge monastery, with much power and influence and a standing army of mercenaries and monks. There Dōgen met a sixty-seven-year-old Abbot called Koin, a famous scholar, but one who had recently turned his back on what he described as the "intellectualism and abstract doctrines of Tendai Buddhism" and embraced the apparently simple practice and faith of Pure Land Buddhism. He too, however, could not give a good enough answer to Dōgen's question and recommended that Dōgen travel further to meet a master named Eisai. Eisai, seventy-one-years-old, had originally been a Tendai priest and had visited China twice. His second trip had been for five years, during which he had studied Rinzai Zen. On his return he had established Ken-ninji Temple in 1202, close to Mt Hiei. This new temple already had a high reputation, particularly for the teaching of Rinzai and especially for the practice of zazen.

When the two men met, Dōgen was impressed by his strong character and his emphasis on the practical experience in ordinary, everyday life and he became interested in Zen for the first

time. Within twelve months however, Eisai died. The following year Koen too died. Dōgen began to travel again, meeting other teachers, trying to find answers to his questions. After three years, he returned to Kenninji, there meeting the thirty-four-year-old Myōzen. Myōzen was Eisai's chief disciple and was now the new abbot of the temple. Myōzen had studied much but was particularly interested in practical daily living and regular zazen. The two men got on very well and Dōgen became Myōzen's disciple. They formed a warm relationship. Dōgen continued his reading and it is said that he read the entire Buddhist Tripitaka (roughly the size of the Encyclopaedia Britannica!!) twice in his years at Kenninji, and his interest in Zen deepened. He received the Rinzaï lineage's Transmission and, in the *Denkoroku*, Keizan writes that Dōgen alone was Myōzen's legitimate heir. In 1221, the ex-Emperor Gotoba launched a war in an attempt to break the power of the military at Kamakura. In doing so, he relied to a great extent on the military strength of the armed monks and mercenaries of the big monasteries. The attempt was crushed, and Gotoba, along with two other ex-Emperors, was banished; all three men were related to Dōgen's own family. Many people were executed in very violent and bloody ways and the military regents took over the running of the Imperial Court and succession. The Jokuyo war, as it was known, ended the power of the Imperial Court and the aristocracy in Japan. Three thousand large estates of Gotoba's supporters were seized by the Shogunate and given to their own supporters; many of Dōgen's own relatives were banished or killed.

Travelling to China and Meeting Tendō Nyojō

The end of the war encouraged Myōzen and Dōgen to travel to China and on 22nd February 1223 they set sail. There were numerous storms and heavy seas. Having never been on board a boat before, Dōgen had bad diarrhoea and suffered greatly. Finally

arriving in April in the port of Minshu in central China, Dōgen stayed on board for three months. Although nobody knows why, it may have been because he didn't have the Vinaya Ordination and so he wasn't regarded by the Chinese authorities as a proper monk. He was able to leave the boat during the day and he visited local temples and talked to their abbots. Dōgen was very disappointed with the level of understanding of the monks he met; they did not seem to know the Scriptures well, while in appearance they more closely resembled the normal people of the day rather than monks. Their whole outlook on what they were doing as monks was very distressing to Dōgen: it seemed as though he had travelled to China in vain. One day however, an elderly monk who was the chief cook for his temple came on board the ship looking to buy mushrooms. The keenness of insight and character of this cook inspired Dōgen not to give up. Dōgen later wrote of their conversation:

“‘Surely it would be better for you to do zazen or study kōans,’ I said . ‘Whatever is the use of working so hard merely at the duties of a Chief Cook?’ He laughed heartily when hearing my comment saying ‘My good foreigner, you have no idea of the true meaning of Buddhist training, or of its character.’ Feeling greatly ashamed and somewhat surprised at his comment, I said ‘What are they?’ ‘Remain still and quiet in the depths of your own questions and their meaning will manifest itself,’ he replied.”⁸

Three months later he travelled to Mt. Tendō, one of the largest, most famous Chinese Zen temples of the time; sponsored by the Chinese Imperial family, it had over one thousand monks and was one of the strictest temples in the land. But being both Japanese and young, Dōgen felt somewhat of an outsider. Once again he was disappointed at the general spiritual level of the monks he encountered and complained to the Abbot. Nothing changed however, and the Abbot himself was said to be fond of both money and

his own reputation. Although disappointed, Dōgen stayed. As time passed, he saw what he felt were the signs of true Zen practice in much lesser-known and more humble monks. In the *Tenzo-kyōkun* Dōgen describes meeting the Chief Cook of the temple:

*“After lunch one day...I saw him busily drying mushrooms in front of the Buddha Hall, wearing no hat and using a bamboo stick: the sun was scorching his head and the pavement, but he continued to work hard, perspiring greatly. Feeling concern for the pain he was obviously enduring at so great an age, for his back was bent as taut as a bow, I said to him, ‘How old are you?’ His big eyebrows were as white as the feathers of a crane. ‘I am sixty-eight,’ he replied. ‘Why do you not give such work to the junior trainees or servants?’ I asked. ‘They are not me,’ he replied. ‘I know you are very sincere, but the sun is now blazing hot. Why work so hard at such a time?’ I asked. ‘What time is there other than now?’ he replied. The conversation went no further than this but as I continued on my way ...I suddenly understood intuitively why the position of Chief Cook is so very important”*⁹

Such people really inspired Dōgen: their example in ordinary, daily life encouraged him to think that there really was an answer to his question and that part of the key to true realization lies in its grounding in the activities of ordinary daily life, rather than spending all day in the meditation hall, or concentrating on studying the Scriptures. Despite this encouragement, his doubts persisted and a while later he left Mt Tendō to resume his pilgrimage. In the *Denkoroku*, Keizan writes of this time, “*Going around engaging various masters in dialogues in this way he developed a high opinion of himself, thinking, ‘There is no one in Japan or in great Sung China equal to me.’*” Indeed, one master slapped him around the face exclaiming “*What a talkative little fellow you are!*”¹⁰ Again he failed to find answers to his questions.

Disappointed, he finally decided to return to Japan, but hearing that Myōzen was ill at Mt. Tendō he returned there to visit him. On his way, he heard the news that both the Abbot and Myōzen had died and that a new Abbot, named Nyojō (Ch. Ju-ching), had been appointed, on the recommendation of the Emperor himself. Nyojō had received the Transmission of the Buddhist Way from the line of Setcho Chikan (d. 1052) and was intent on re-establishing the traditional and right teaching of that master. It's said that he insisted all his disciples devoted themselves fully to the life of practice and that he accepted only the most diligent and sincere students. Both Nyojō and Dōgen had heard very good things of each other and wanted to meet. On May 1st 1225, Dōgen bowed before Nyojō and offered incense for the first time. Dōgen later wrote of him: *"His community was a community of ancient Buddhas. He completely reformed the monastery...Nyojō had received the Dharma robe of Dokai of Mt Fuyo but did not wear it even for his installation ceremony...Both those who understood the meaning of his actions and those who did not praised and respected him as a man of true knowledge and insight...[he] always admonished the monks by saying, 'In recent years many use the names of the Ancestors, boastfully wear Dharma robes, keep their hair long, and chase after titles from the Emperor in order to become well-known. That is a great pity. How can anyone possibly save those people? What a shame that elders everywhere lack a mind for the Way and have no real study. Even among thousands of monks there is not one who really comprehends the true meaning...' He admonished all the monks in this manner, but none felt any resentment towards him."*¹¹

Keizan says of Nyojō that he was the only representative of the twelfth generation from Tōzan, and even though Nyojō was keeping this fact secret, he did not conceal it from Dōgen, nor did

he withhold oral instructions from him. It's said that from their first meeting, Dōgen let go of his argumentativeness, and Nyojō granted his young disciple's request to come to the abbatical quarters at any time of day or night to respectfully ask questions about the essentials of the Dharma. Within a few months under Nyojō's strict guidance, Dōgen had a decisive realization one night as he sat in the meditation hall. Nyojō confirmed the experience and the relationship between them deepened. However, as Dōgen wrote later on: *"Those who believe awakening to enlightenment to be an overwhelming and enormous occasion will, in the event of its occurrence, find themselves to have been well off the mark. Those with no preconceived ideas, on the other hand, allow enlightenment to arise naturally."*¹² *"...even if you have attained enlightenment, do not stop practicing. Do not think that you have reached the pinnacle. The Way is endless..."*¹³ Dōgen stayed a further two years, occasionally visiting other masters, but returning to Nyojō to continue his training. The importance in our tradition of the active questioning of the teacher by the student cannot be over-emphasised. Nyojō told him: *"You conduct yourself like the ancient Buddhas. You will undoubtedly propagate the Ancestral Way. My finding you is like Shakyamuni finding Makakashyo."* It is the uninterrupted direct succession from master to disciple based on deep faith that gives the firm foundation in this tradition.

He received the Transmission of the Sōtō Zen lineage from Nyojō and in August 1227, feeling it was time to return to his home country, he set sail for Japan. Before Dōgen left, Nyojō gave him two final pieces of advice: first, that in order to be able to transmit the enlightenment of Shakyamuni Buddha, one needed to put aside all ideas of past, present and future, and realize that enlightenment is always present now and here; secondly *"When you return to Japan work to enlighten the minds of all people throughout the*

*land. Do not live near the capital or by rich and powerful persons. Avoid Emperors, ministers or generals. Stay in the deep mountains, remote from worldly affairs, and devote yourself to the education of young monks. Even if you have only one disciple, do not terminate the Transmission I have given you”.*¹⁴ During the sea passage home, the ship came close to destruction in a typhoon. It’s said that one of the passengers was reciting the Kanzeon Scripture and had a vision of Kanzeon at the end of the boat. The vision was so beautiful that all the passengers moved towards it; as a result, the centre of gravity in the boat shifted and the boat did not sink.

Returning to Japan

Developing his own interpretation within the tradition, Dōgen rejected the name Zen School and stressed the importance of the correct Transmission of a unified Buddhism; he firmly rejected the religious fatalism prevalent in his time. Returning to Kenninji, Dōgen wrote *Rules for Meditation*, in which he explained the theoretical and practical basis for ‘just sitting’. In the opening lines, he states the problem he had come up against whilst studying as a young monk, and his solution: “*Why are training and enlightenment differentiated since the Truth is universal? Why study the means of attaining it since the supreme teaching is free?...Since Truth is not separate from training, training is unnecessary—however, the separation would be as that between heaven and earth if even the slightest gap exists for, when the opposites arise the Buddha Mind is lost...All you have to do is cease from erudition, withdraw within and reflect upon yourself...*”¹⁵

There was a problem however: the other monks of Kenninji were not keen on his ideas. Dōgen himself later commented: “*These days the decay of the Buddha-Dharma is right before our eyes. From the time I first entered Kenninji Monastery, over a*

*period of seven or eight years, I gradually saw many changes taking place. They had storerooms in each temple building, each person having his own utensils. Many became fond of fine clothing, stored up personal possessions, and indulged in idle talk. No one cared about the forms of greeting one another nor about prostrating before the Buddha. Looking at these things, I can imagine what other places must be like.”*¹⁶ In 1228 he learned of Nyojō’s death and felt even more urgently the need to fulfil the injunction he had been given. In the same year he was visited by a monk named Koun Ejō. Ejō, born in Kyoto just two years before Dōgen, was from the Fujiwara clan. He had been ordained as a Tendai monk in 1215 on Mt Hiei, but had left after his mother had scolded him for studying for fame and high position and ended up studying in the Zen tradition and receiving the Transmission. He was one of a number of monks who came to Dōgen from the *Nippon-Darumashu* (Japanese Dharma school). This had evolved from Dainichi Nonin who had not gone to China but practised on his own and had an enlightenment experience. Because Nonin was vilified for not having received dharma transmission, he had sent two of his disciples to China with a letter containing his understanding, and had received *inka*¹⁷ in this way. Ejō had studied under Nonin’s successor and also received *inka*. Ejō was the monk who later became Dōgen’s chief disciple. He compiled Dōgen’s talks and his record of the informal talks became the *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*. He was an absolutely key figure in the transmission of Dōgen’s thought. Recognizing his potential, Dōgen advised him: “*I have received Transmission of the true Way and am attempting to promote it in Japan. I am staying in this temple for the time being, but later I will find my own place to practise. After I have found a place, visit me again. You cannot practise following me here*”¹⁸.

Moving two years later to a small hermitage, Dōgen began, in 1231, the first chapter of what was to become his masterpiece, the *Shōbōgenzō* (or “*The Eye and Treasury of the True Law*”). As we go through the rest of Dōgen’s life, I want to pick out the chapters of his that Rev Master Jiyu put in *Zen is Eternal Life* and give a very brief background. This first chapter was *Bendōwa*, (‘A Story of Buddhist Practice’) and was a series of questions and answers designed to explain the principles of Sōtō Zen in plain, direct language. It is thought by some that the questions and answers were mainly based on the discussions that Dōgen and Ejō had at their meeting in Kenninji. In it Dōgen claimed that Zen referred to the actualisation of the perfect enlightenment enjoyed by all of the Buddhas, rather than to a type of meditation. In the *Nirvana Sutra*, there is a famous passage that reads: “All beings have the Buddha Nature.”; Dōgen re-interpreted this as “All beings are the Buddha Nature!” Dōgen wrote that practice had been passed down directly from Shakyamuni Buddha and was available to all people. “*In China, even now, the Emperor, ministers, soldiers and people, both men and women are interested in the Way of the Ancestors; both warriors and scholars have the will to train themselves and many will understand the Truth; all these people’s lives tell us clearly that worldly work is no hindrance whatsoever to Buddhism.*”¹⁹ He continued: “*...everything depends upon the will of the person involved, and has nothing to do whatsoever with whether a person is a layman or a priest...As yet the core of Zazen has not been transmitted in Japan and those who wish to know it are thereby made unhappy. Because of this, when in China I collected all that I saw and heard, wrote down what the masters taught and, with all this, wish to help those who are in search of training; I also want to teach the rules and ceremonies to be found in the temples but have no time to do so for they cannot be described in simplified form.*”²⁰ In the same year this was written, Japan was rocked

by famines, epidemics, fires, many earthquakes, and continuing social upheaval. The catalogue of disasters continued throughout the rest of that decade. In 1232, Kyoto, very close to Dōgen's hermitage, was filled with dead bodies from the starvation.

At the same time, Dōgen was beginning to make a name for himself and word was spreading. In 1233, the number of monks and lay people coming to him meant he had to move a short distance to the larger (but run-down) buildings of an older temple. He renamed it Kannon Dōri-in, and there he wrote the chapter *Genjokōan (The Problem of Everyday Life)* in which, amongst other things, he pointed out: “*It is not possible for us to know clearly when we are giving deep expression to the Way of Truth since it is an action which arises simultaneously and synonymously with Buddhist study. It is wrong to believe that one is fully aware of being enlightened, as personal knowledge, even after enlightenment: that which is intuitive cannot necessarily be given easy expression and definite form even though enlightenment is already ours.*”²¹ At Kannon Dori-in, he was able to manage his own affairs because there was no direct link with the Buddhist establishment; he and his monks however, were very poor.

First Temple Devoted to “Just Sitting”

In 1234, Koun Ejō re-appeared and became a disciple. More and more people continued to make their way to Dōgen to train under his guidance. In the same year the *Gakudōyōjinshū (Aspects of Zazen)* chapter was written. In it Dōgen observed: “*...to enter the stream of Buddhism one must just simply harmonise the mind and the body—Shakyamuni said that one must turn the stream of compassion within and give up knowledge and its recognition*”²²; and later “*To face the Way squarely is to know the true source of Buddhism and make clear the approach thereto for it is beneath the feet of every living person: you find Buddhism in the very spot*

where you perceive the Way."²³ In the final months at Kannon Dori-in, Dōgen began to collect donations to build a brand new monastery. At this time he had no financial means and no wealthy patrons, but in less than a year he had enough donations to begin construction and within twelve months it was finished. The opening ceremony in 1236 of Kōshō-ji Temple was very significant in that it was the first independent Chinese-style Zen monastery in Japan. Indeed, it was so novel that word quickly spread and the temple and its practice attracted respect and attention from people round about, particularly in the imperial capital of Kyoto. People came down from there just to look at it; no one had ever seen anything like it—rather than seeing monks bowing, chanting, or performing ceremonies as was the norm, the monks were ‘just sitting’ in a hall with wide raised platforms. Word continued to spread and soon Dōgen had some wealthy patrons; an aristocratic nun named Shogaku, for example, donated a lecture hall. *“Only if we keep practising the Buddha-Way in a humble manner following the customs of the country will people of all classes support us by making offerings of their own accord and will practice for ourselves and for the benefit of others be fulfilled.”*²⁴

The following year saw Dōgen writing the *Tenzo-kyōkun* (*Instructions for the Chief Cook*) which contains much information both practical and spiritual applicable by all of us in our own areas of activity and responsibility. Towards the end is a beautiful section on the ‘Three Attitudes of Mind’ to be cultivated: *“...these are gratitude, love and generosity. The mind of ecstasy expresses gratitude...How lucky we are: how blessed is this body: for all eternity there is no greater opportunity than that offered to us now; its merit is undefileable...The mind of our parents expresses love and we must love the Three Treasures in the same way as our parents love us... A generous mind is one that is as firm as a rock and as limitless as the ocean, completely lacking in discrim-*

ination...*The wide highway to enlightenment is our own training; whosoever we are...all must keep these three attitudes of mind in their thoughts.*"²⁵ 1238 saw the pieces of advice given informally as talks by Dōgen (that we now know as the *Zuimonki*), finished by Koun Ejō. Two years later, Dōgen wrote *Uji* (*The Theory of Time*). "*They travel fastest who are not there,*" he observed on the progress of the trainee, "*since arrival is hindered by arrival but quite definitely not hindered whilst on the journey: the journey is hindered by non-arrival but not hindered by arrival...*"²⁶

The *Taitaikohō* (*How Junior Priests Must Behave in the Presence of Senior Priests*) was written by him in 1242 and this still forms part of the foundation of the training of young monks in the temples of our Order. Although the sixty-two rules can seem arcane to our modern eye to begin with, Dōgen was perfectly serious when he wrote at the end of this piece: "*The foregoing code of behaviour represents the True Body and Mind of the Buddhas and Ancestors; if you do not realise this to the full the Pure Law will disappear and the Way of the Buddhas and Ancestors will be laid waste...this behavioural code is...the very perfection of Mahayana.*"²⁷ Later in the same year, he first met some of his most powerful sponsors. Visiting Kyoto, he had an audience at the Konoe mansion, home of a father and son who were two of the most powerful figures of the Imperial Court. The son had recently stepped down from his job as Imperial Regent. Both men liked Dōgen and his teaching and agreed to sponsor him. In December, Dōgen was lecturing on the 'Zenki' (*Live Fully, Die Fully*) chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō* in the castle of Hatono Yoshishige. Yoshishige was another very influential figure: described as "*a politically powerful, battle-scarred, one-eyed warrior, who represented the Kamakura Shogunate in Kyoto as a member of the supervisory council...*"²⁸ Yoshishige and Dōgen probably first met after Dōgen returned from China, whilst still living at Kenninji. Yoshishige

rapidly became Dōgen's strongest patron, and Dōgen's introduction to the Konoe mansion probably came about through the fact that Yoshishige's family were the military land stewards who oversaw the Konoe estates. Dōgen's lecturing at a small Tendai temple next to the rival Kenninji in April 1243 marked the high point of his political eminence; it would have been unthinkable without the sponsorship and protection of Yoshishige and Konoe.

The Founding of Eihei-ji

The nearby monks on Mt. Hiei began to harass Dōgen, accusing him of 'innovations'. Some sources even suggest there was an attempt made to burn down the temple. Worried about the future of his community, Dōgen remembered Nyojō's advice not to live near the capital and was spurred on to move again. One source notes "*..any Buddhist groups unaffiliated with the officially sanctioned temples were regarded as heretical outcasts. Claims for an independent, sectarian Zen institution were not tolerated in the [imperial] capital.*"²⁹ Yoshishige offered Dōgen a place in a very remote, rural setting deep in the mountains. As well as land, he offered him money, stability, and military and political protection. Within the year Dōgen left Kōshō-ji, travelling to the remote province of Echizen, where he lived in the small temple of Kippoji for twelve months. Within a month of Dōgen and his disciples arriving, Yoshishige was personally supervising the clearing of the land he had donated for the new monastery. The building was begun by Yoshishige and several other lay disciples of Dōgen. Yoshishige's cousin, Kakunen, also a warrior official living in Kyoto, controlled another estate in Echizen. He too liked Dōgen and his teaching and supported Dōgen's move. When Yoshishige built a lecture hall for the new monastery, Kakunen had a monks' hall built. The significance of the whole project lay in the start of Dōgen's complete economic dependence on the warrior class. For all of his previous life in Japan he had lived in a setting dominated by the old

aristocracy. Even in the temples he was forced to abandon, he was still, to a certain extent, financially dependent upon the aristocrats and relied on their tolerance of him. The move to Echizen meant that Dōgen had thrown his lot in with a socially inferior class; they were not rich compared to Kyoto's standards, but nevertheless they had the wherewithal to build a much better temple than the previous ones. The warriors also had the means to protect him.

Constructed in wood and finished the next year, the new temple's opening ceremony was held on the 13th July 1244. Dōgen named it *Daibutsu-ji*—'Great Buddha Temple'. There were only a few buildings, but straight away he took up his writing again. Concentrating mainly on Chinese monastic codes, he was putting into place the framework for the temple and the training of his monks. In 1246, he renamed the temple *Eihei-ji*—'The Temple of Eternal Peace', after the Eihei period of Chinese history (roughly 50 AD), when Buddhism was first thought to have entered China. In his talk at the time of the re-naming, Dōgen quoted the words ascribed to the Buddha: "Above the heavens and below the heaven, I alone am the Honoured One. Even though the World-Honoured one had such a Way, I, Eihei, have a Way for the great assembly to verify." After a pause, Dōgen said: "Above the heavens and below the heaven, this very place is 'Eihei' [Eternally Peaceful]." ³⁰ He ran his first summer training period of three months. The monks complained how difficult it was and how meagre the resources were. Dōgen told them that the greatness of a temple is determined, not by how many monks there are, but by the strength of their resolve to train themselves.

In the same year he completed *Bendōhō* (*How to Train in Buddhism*). This comprised very precise instructions on daily life in the monastery - what you do, how you do it; this was putting down on paper the forms that are still the bedrock of monastic training and how they are actually carried through, for his dis-

principles and for the future. “Thoughts must not be discriminated about, as in ‘this is good or this is bad’” he wrote, “understanding is only possible when one is beyond discriminative thought: this point is vital to zazen.”³¹ He had finally realized what Nyojō had asked him to do, in that he had established a monastic community along the classic Chinese Zen monastery lines. Most of Dōgen’s literary works from this point on were transcriptions of talks he gave about daily events and on Zen kōans; he gave these to his disciples as part of the monastic calendar of events. These talks make up a week-to-week record of what he was thinking and what he was doing. These lectures were put together into his *Eihei-koroku* (a koroku is a Chinese-language recorded sayings); it was the first Zen *koroku* of Japan.

Yoshishige was transferred to the military capital of Kamakura and in 1247 invited Dōgen to visit him. Dōgen stayed for over seven months and Yoshishige offered to build him a new temple there. Returning to Eihei-ji he found his monks very fed up with him for being away for so long. They told him he was more concerned with the general’s opinion of him than with his own disciples. Meanwhile Dōgen was conducting ceremonies which involved both his monks and the lay Sangha. Local officials and villagers were coming along to participate in the *Renewal of Vows* ceremony. The following quotation from this time gives another perspective on the young temple:

“More than twenty laymen who participated in one ...[Renewal of Vows] ceremony at Eihei-ji in 1247 witnessed the appearance of multi-coloured clouds shining out from the abbot’s building. The laymen were so awed by the experience that they wrote a pledge always to testify to the truth of its occurrence. On other occasions at Eihei-ji, when Dōgen preached to officials or noble ladies, gongs from an unearthly temple bell echoed throughout the valley and the fragrance of unknown incense filled the

air. Dōgen also conducted ceremonies for the public worship of the sixteenArhants who protect Buddhism. During one of these services in 1249, rays of light shone out from the images and the Arhants themselves magically appeared before the worshippers as heavenly flowers rained down.”³² Dōgen wrote that “such apparitions had been known previously only at Mt. Tendō in China.” Whether these events happened or not, what is important about them is that people believed that they happened and, because of that, the integrity and reputation of Dōgen, and of Eihei-ji as a place of pure practice, was much enhanced. Such events were thought only to happen in places where the training, particularly of the monks, was pure.

Last Writings and Death

1249 saw the compilation of the *Shuryo-shingi* (*Trainees’ Hall or Library Rules*),³³ which, again, still govern aspects of life in the temples of our Order. He also wrote the *Fushuku-hampō* (*Meal-time Regulations*)³⁴ and these are the basis of the formal meals that we take together each day. The following year saw his health begin to deteriorate, but he kept up his writing and his lecturing. The ex-Emperor Gotoba offered him a purple robe, but Dōgen declined. The offer continued to be made and was eventually insisted on! Dōgen accepted the robe but chose not to wear it until he was on his deathbed. In 1252, his health took a dramatic turn for the worse (it was probably cancer). He lay in bed for ten months, with no sign of improvement. People encouraged him to seek medical help but he didn’t. In January 1253, beginning to realize that death wasn’t far away, he wrote his final chapter of *Shōbōgenzō: Hachi Dai-nin-gaku* (*The Eight Means to Enlightenment*).³⁵ (This teaching is also considered to be the Buddha’s own last teaching, and if you are interested in it, Throssel’s bookshop produces a CD of Rev. Master Jiyu reading this chapter with her own commentary too.) His monks and lay disciples, particularly

Yoshishige, put him under renewed pressure to find medical help. Finally, in July, he gave in. Officially appointing Koun Ejō as his Dharma Heir and the Abbot of Eihei-ji, on 5th August he left for Kyoto with Ejō and some of his closest disciples. But the long and difficult journey did not help him. He died in the home of his lay disciple Kakunen on the night of 28th August. Aware that his end was imminent, he said goodbye to Ejō and his other disciples who were deeply upset at the passing of this monk who had enabled so much to happen.

It's said that his death wasn't taken very much notice of in the imperial capital, particularly by the Buddhist establishment: that he was basically a nobody to them. However, looking back, we can see he had achieved, apart from everything else, the successful setting up of one of the earliest independent Zen training monasteries in the whole of Japan; not only that, it was a viable concern, with economic support, political and military protection, a solid monastic base and with lay disciples and a lay community. He was also one of the very few people to have established a monastery completely independent, politically and spiritually, both of the aristocracy and imperial government, as well as the Shogunate. Dōgen had also managed to remain independent of the Buddhist establishment and hierarchy of the time.

Notes

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1950 vol. 12, p. 954B
2. *Ibid.*, p. 905
3. The Tendai school was brought to Japan in the 9th century. As a school it combined the teachings of all the periods of Buddhism and regarded itself as avoiding the extremes and one-sided views of other schools. The study of the *Lotus Sutra* and the belief that all beings inherently possessed Buddha nature were aspects of the Tendai teaching that had an impact on Dōgen. (See *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, Shambhala, 1991, p. 225.)
4. *History of Japanese Religion* by Masaharu Anesaki, Charles E. Tuttle Co. Inc. 1963

5. The *Kenzei-ki* was a biography written about 150 years after Dōgen's death. Some Japanese scholars in the 1960s and 70s pointed out that it may have "embellished details of his life", although it seems the main facts are accurate (See Heine, Steven. Dōgen and the Koan tradition, SUNY, 1994, p. 74.) *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* - translated by Shohaku Okumura; Kyoto Soto-Zen Centre, 1987, p. 88
6. *Zen is Eternal Life* - Roshi P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Shasta Abbey Press, 1999, p. 211. Henceforth abbreviated to ZIEL.
7. *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* op. cit., pp. 149-150
8. ZIEL p. 153
9. ZIEL p. 152
10. *The Denkoroku* - Zen Master Keizan, Shasta Abbey Press, 2001, p. 282
11. *Shōbōgenzō* vol. 2 - Kosen Nishiyama 1977, p. 182
12. *Shōbōgenzō* vol. 3 - Kosen Nishiyama 1983, 'Yuibutsu Yobutsu', p. 129
13. *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* op. cit., p. 216
14. *Shōbōgenzō* vol, 1 - Kosen Nishiyama 1975, p. xvii
15. *The Liturgy of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives for the Laity* - P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, Shasta Abbey Press 1990, pp. 97-98
16. *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* – op. cit., p. 116
17. Inka: defined as the confirmation that authentic enlightenment has been clearly shown. (See *The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, Shambhala, 1991, p. 100.)
18. *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* – op. cit., p. 6
19. ZIEL p. 191
20. ZIEL p. 195
21. ZIEL pp. 209-210
22. ZIEL p. 172
23. ZIEL p. 177
24. *Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* – op. cit., p.65
25. ZIEL pp. 159-161
26. ZIEL p. 204
27. ZIEL p. 108
28. *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan* - William M. Bodiford, University of Hawaii Press, 1993. p. 27
29. *Ibid.*, p. 29
30. *Dōgen's Extensive Record* (Eihei Koroku) p. 198
31. ZIEL p. 142
32. *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan*, op. cit., p. 31
33. ZIEL p. 108
34. ZIEL p. 113
35. *Shōbōgenzō* vol 4 1983- Kosen Nishiyama p34