

# Sandōkai

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The *Sandōkai* is a profound religious poem written by one of the great Masters in the Sōtō Zen tradition, Rev. Master Sekitō Kisen, who was born in China in 700 CE and lived to the ripe old age of 90. When he was fourteen years old he entered monastic life and he went and studied with the sixth ancestor Huineng (also known as Daikan Enō). He didn't study with him for very long because Huineng died, but before his death Huineng pointed him in the direction of another teacher, a Dharma relative of his, Seigen Gyoshi.

So Sekito goes and trains with Seigen Gyoshi and in Keizan's *Denkōroku*<sup>1</sup> there is a description of some of the dialogues that took place between him and this teacher. The interchange that takes place sometime after they've been training together awakens him to a deeper understanding of the truth. They're talking one to another and his teacher raises the fountain sceptre, a symbol of compassion. At that point, Sekitō Kisen still thinks of It, but hasn't experienced It directly. Seigen at this critical point strikes him with the fountain sceptre and then he realises that It exists.

A similar kind of dialogue is recorded when my namesake Saidō had an interchange with another Master; they had both at that point been practising for many years. There was an interchange about grasping emptiness. Saidō tries to grasp it by showing grasping with his hand into the empty air. We are external judges of these interchanges and it's very easy to say that someone is wrong and someone is right, that's duality—setting up one view against the other and missing the point. When he grasped emptiness with his hand the Master grabbed him by the nose and he experienced It deeply. <sup>2</sup>

So right in Sekitō's life there is this whole question about the necessity of speaking of it and yet not being able to express anything, as any kind of expression is always limiting.

To quote from the *Denkōroku*:

When Sekitō went to train with Seigen Gyoshi the latter asked, "Where do you come from?" Sekitō answered, "I come from Sōkei Monastery." Gyoshi raised his fountain sceptre and asked, "Do they still have this sort of thing at Sōkei?" Sekitō replied, "Not only do they not have it at Sōkei, it also does not exist in India." Gyoshi said "But my child, you've never gone to India have you?" Sekitō said "If I had gone then it would be there!" Gyoshi said "That is not good enough; go on and say more!" Sekitō replied, "Reverend Priest, you should also take on half of the talking; do not depend wholly on this neophyte!" Gyoshi said "I do not shirk from talking to you about IT, but I fear lest afterwards there will be no one to grasp what IT is." Sekitō responded "It is not that one will grasp IT but there is no one who will be able to speak about IT!" Gyoshi struck Sekitō with the fountain sceptre whereupon Sekitō had a great awakening to his TRUE SELF.

At a later point, reading ‘Discourses of the Monk Chō’ he came across the passage:

“Does only a sage understand the myriad things which comprise the universe and his self?”

Sekitō thumped the desk and said “A sage has no SELF and there is nothing that is not of the SELF.”

(“Self” in capital letters in our translation of the *Denkōroku*).

“The DHARMA-BODY is beyond form; who speaks of self and other. The PERFECT MIRROR is wondrously clear and bright; within it myriad images appear spontaneously with the mystery of the SUBSTANCE. The objects of perception and the enlightened wisdom that contemplates them are not one and the same thing. Who says they come and go?”

...He then rolled up the scroll and before he was aware of it, fell into a sleep in which he dreamt that he and Daikan Enō were riding on the back of a turtle which was swimming about in a deep body of water. Upon awakening he interpreted his dream as follows, “The marvellous turtle is ENLIGHTENED WISDOM, the sea is the BUDHHA NATURE. The patriarch Enō and I were riding on the Divine Wisdom which wanders where it will through the waters of the BUDHHA NATURE.” Shortly after this he composed his ‘Sandōkai’ which has been widely circulated.

... “The terms ‘Original Nature’, ‘Buddha’ and ‘sentient beings’, as well as ‘enlightenment’ and ‘defiling passions’ may be different but their SUBSTANCE is one and the same. You should all know that the SUBSTANCE of your own intelligence is sep-

arate from annihilation or permanence; your TRUE NATURE is neither dirty nor clean. Profound and clear, perfect and complete, the mundane and the saintly are one and the same; IT functions freely apart from will, intention and consciousness. The three temporal worlds and the six realms of existence are merely ORIGINAL NATURE manifesting ITSELF like the moon in water or images in a mirror; how could there possibly be birth and death? If you can realise this there will be nothing that is not perfect.” The above really makes Heaven and Earth collapse in ruins; had he not had his personal vision he could not have spoken in this way. By having grasped why he was struck, and by clearly making IT evident, he took his place as the thirty fifth ancestor. How can the spiritual nature of anyone be separated from that of any other? <sup>3</sup>

It’s from this place that you have to approach the *Sandōkai*. This is where it’s written from. It’s so easy to get bogged down in trying to explain it. There is not a problem in trying to explain it, but we have to realise that we must always go deeper when we approach something that is written in such a precise and concise form. Chinese writing characters are based on pictures and can potentially convey multiple meanings, English writing in poetry can also give a depth of impression and have layered meanings at the same time.

The *Sandōkai* is twenty two couplets, two hundred and twenty characters in length. It’s very concise. Each couplet often contrasts two seemingly opposing statements. So the structure of the original poem reflects the title, which points to the meeting or bringing together of the seeming opposites.

The title *Can Ton Qi* (TS'AN-T'UNG-CH'I) (Chinese)—*Sandōkai* (Japanese) has much in it. It makes reference to a very well known Daoist text which was written in the Han Dynasty around the year twenty five CE. This particular Daoist text has the same title and is a description of the kind of esoteric practices that you undertake in order to become an immortal or transform yourself into a deity. He's using this as kind of a pointer, but this text is showing the mind of Buddha. How you view things, how you practice the mind of Buddha.

'*Can Ton Qi*.' *Can* means participating in. It can mean functioning, merging, and integrating. *Ton* means together. The character means 'under a blanket', so it means equalness or same, sameness, together. *Qi* is a promise or an agreement, or a vow, or a meeting of minds. So the title can imply a kind of promise of the meeting of light and dark, simultaneously in the present moment: both the same and different at the same time. Light and dark, emptiness and form, absolute and relative.

There are twelve different translations available.<sup>4</sup> They're all different and they're all saying the same thing. The titles are interesting; people have approached it in all kinds of ways: '*Ode Honouring Identity*', '*Harmony of Difference and Sameness*', '*Harmony of Difference and Equality*', '*Merging of Difference and Sameness*', '*The Identity of Relative and the Absolute*', '*Realising Unity*', '*Enquiry into Matching Halves*', '*The Promise of Meeting Unity*', '*Harmonising the All is One and the All is Different at the Same Time*', '*The Oneness of One and Many*'. Sekitō uses all kinds of examples to try and bring out the meaning in this title. I'm not going to explain in detail every line here, but just show how Sekitō is taking the original point in the title and applies it to all these various situations.

From west to east, unseen, flowed out the Mind

Of India's greatest Sage,

And to the source kept true as an unsullied stream is clear.

Although by wit and dullness the True Way is varied

Yet it has no patriarch of south or north.

'The mind of India's greatest sage' is the mind of enlightenment, the enlightened mind, the awakened mind. Even to say 'Mind', you're already into words that differentiate and yet you have to use words to point to what is unified and different at the same time.

The Northern and Southern schools: behind that there's the story of Hui-neng.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand (the Northern or 'gradual' school), there is practice in the world of differences; as clearing the bright mirror mind of all the dust that falls upon it and how continuing to practice can allow it to reflect clearly ("dullness" in the Scripture). On the other hand (the Southern or 'sudden' school), there is pointing to the absolute; there's nothing from the first, there's no dust to alight on the mirror ("wit"). Neither of these is superior. They are the same and different at the same time.

Sekitō uses brightness and darkness in different ways. Dark and bright. Darkness, the black circle completely filled in with black, can be used to mean the absolute, the fundamental. Emptiness, sameness, nothing is differentiated, everything is the same. We come from a culture that would find that strange. The dark circle means the absolute—you can't tell the differ-

ence between anything in there. The bright circle can mean the relative, the phenomenon, difference, many, all kinds of different attributes; because in the brightness everything becomes differentiated and seen. One is not better than the other. One is not separate from the other. You can also use darkness to mean obstruction: it can't be seen; it's unclear—muddy. The brightness is the source, like moonlight, gentle; all encompassing: the source. The fifth and sixth lines can be translated as “The spiritual source shines clear in the light. The branching streams flow on in the dark.”<sup>6</sup> There's that which branches out and flows, and yet in using “branching streams” flowing there is a seeming contradiction: water doesn't flow out into branches. Water has branches which flow into just one river. So already there is an image of something which is flowing backwards and returning to the source and yet showing itself as differentiation.

Here born, we clutch at things

And then compound delusion later on by following ideals.

Each sense gate and its object all together enter thus

in mutual relations

And yet stand part in a uniqueness of their own,

depending and yet non-depending both.

Our senses only work because they have an object, and this goes back into Buddhist doctrine and teaching of the ‘Dharmas’. The eye and its object, the nose and the smell, these things are linked together. In order to have a sense of a self perceiving,

there has to be an object, the senses and a consciousness of the senses. We create this sense of separateness through our mental ‘processing kit’. These things appear separate and yet they are still one.

In form and feel component things are seen to differ deeply,

Thus are voices in inherent isolation, soft and harsh.

Such words as “high” and “middle” darkness match;

Light separates the murky from the pure.

The properties of the four elements together draw

Just as a child returns unto its mother.

Lo! The heat of fire, the moving wind, the water wet,

the earth all solid,

Eyes to see, sounds heard and smells;

upon the tongue the sour, salty taste.

And yet in each related thing, as leaves grow from the roots,

End and beginning here return unto the source and

“high” and “low” are used respectively .

There might be refined speech, there might be vulgar or common speech: it’s speech. They are unified and at the same time you can hear that there’s a difference. The elements, like

fire and water and air is an ancient way of looking at what we are. Fire and heat, wind moving, water is wet, these things have a quality like a child and its mother: the object and the feeling of the object. They are linked and they are separate, and they are unified with each other.

Trunk and branches share the essence, but look at a plant and it has roots and it has leaves and the leaves branch. With many plants if you look at the leaf it looks like the whole plant. Infinite branching and yet the same thing.

Within all light is darkness,

But explained it cannot be by darkness that one-sided is alone.

In darkness there is light

But here again, by light one-sided it is not explained.

Light goes with darkness

As the sequence does of steps in walking;

All things herein have inherent, great potentiality;

Both function, rest, reside within.

Lo! with the ideal comes the actual,

Like a box all with its lid.

Lo! with the ideal comes

The actual, like two arrows in mid-air that meet.

Light and darkness, darkness and light, like steps in walking. When you walk you take one step and then another, you are walking but the different steps are unified, light and dark in each step. Phenomena exist. Box and lid fit. Go and look at a box. Take the lid off and there are two separate things; put it back on and it's one. It was never separate in the first place. The apparent phenomena of a box and a lid fitting together.

Here is another version of the section about the ideal and the actual: "Principle responds; arrow points meet."<sup>7</sup> Imagine two arrows meeting together. Chinese is a pictorial language, you have to get the images. Arrowheads meet, there's no gap: this is oneness. If you get caught in oneness it is not enough, as it was talked about in the interchange between Seigen Gyoshi and Sekitō. But get caught in differentiation, get caught in the phenomena, 'the ten thousand things' which are constantly whirled around within our lives and you become deluded. Both go together like the steps in walking and are all It. The It that can't be expressed yet it is expressed in this poem. The underlying message of this *Sandōkai* is It, which cannot be spoken of. It has the appearance of phenomena and yet at the same time has oneness. Hearing the words, understand the meaning and don't set up your own standards.

Completely understand herein

The basic truth within these words.

Lo! Hear! Set up not your own standards.

If, from your experience of the senses, basic Truth

you do not know,

How can you ever find the path that certain is, no

matter how far distant you may walk?

As you walk on, distinctions between near and far are lost.

And, should you lost become, there will arise

obstructing mountains and great rivers.

This I offer to the seeker of great Truth:

Do not waste time.

It's not a matter of near or far away, it's right now, right here. There's another translation of the *Sandōkai* which says that if you practice "it is not in vain." And what is the practice that this points to? We practice reverence, we practice care. We have a go at that, it doesn't work all the time, but it is our underlying intention to practice as if everything is Buddha: nothing is separate, nothing is better, nothing is worse. Don't judge and make the separation appear, everything is It, including us. That is what we forget. We don't always have someone to hit our heads to make us experience It. He was lucky.

So the *Sandōkai* helps us practice. It's profound because it shows the connection between everything. It shows the connection of ourselves to the source. It shows that we can see through passing phenomena and at the same time that's what we live

with and we don't have to push it away and try and find somewhere else. There is nowhere else—this is it.

So this is a text which we recite regularly. We can have some insight into it and relate it to our ordinary daily life; which is not as ordinary as we might think.

### Notes

1. Keizan Zenji, *The Denkōroku or the Record of the Transmission of the Light*, trans. R. M. Hubert Nearman, (Mt. Shasta CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 1993) p. 186 & 189.
2. See *The book of equanimity: illuminating classic Zen koans*, by Gerry Shishin Wick, (MA, USA: Wisdom, 2005) p. 142.
3. Keizan Zenji, op cit. p. 190-191
4. <http://home.pon.net/wildrose/promise.htm> with a translation by Gregory Wonderwheel.
5. See the *Platform Sutra*. The Northern and Southern schools arose when the fifth Chinese Patriarch (Hung-jen) set a test to see who to choose as his successor. He asked the monks to express their understanding in a poem. Shen-hsui wrote a poem in which he compare the human body to Bodhi-tree and the mind to a stand holding a mirror that must be continuously cleaned to keep it free of dust. When Hui-neng heard this poem he composed the following poem in answer to it. “Fundamentally bodhi is no tree/Nor is the clear mirror a stand/ Since everything is empty from the first,/What is there for dust to cling to?” Hung-jen chose Hui-neng as his successor (the Southern School), whilst Shen-hsui formed the Northern School.
6. From <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/sandokai.htm>. This version (without the Chinese characters) is also found on the websites of the Minnesota Zen Center, <http://www.mnzencenter.org/sandokai.html>, the Mountain Source Sangha, <http://www.mtsource.org/chants/sandokai.html>, the Bamboo in the Wind Sangha, [http://bamboointhewind.org/chant\\_sandokai.html](http://bamboointhewind.org/chant_sandokai.html)
7. Translation by Minnesota Zen Center.