

Great Master Dogen – Father of Soto Zen in Japan

By Beth Kaminaka

In 1200 CE, Eihei Dogen (Dogen Zengi / Eihei Koso) was born - 58th ancestor of our ancestral lineage at Pine Mountain Temple and the “Father of Zen” for, even though he lived a relatively short 53 years, he is the founder of the Soto Zen tradition in Japan. Although I have heard the name and knew that he had a profound impact on our teaching, I was not really aware of who he was. Last August, Pine Mountain offered a seven-day silent retreat on the teachings of Dogen. While we only scratched the surface, the offering was enough to open my eyes to the vast writings of this Great Master. Fascinated by this, I wanted to know about the man – who he was, the time he lived in, and how did this influence his training. This is what I found:

Buddhism had first been introduced into Japan from Korea as early as 522 CE. Prince Shotaku (ruled 593-622) was the first to make Buddhism the state religion of Japan even though a majority of the people continued to practice Shinto - a religion where practice and ritual, rather than words, are of the utmost importance. Shinto is characterized by the worship of nature, ancestors, polytheism, and animism, with a strong focus on ritual purity. While animism was widely practiced all over Japan, the formal body of Shinto did not emerge as a centralized religious institution until the arrival of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, beginning in the 6th century. By the end of the Nara period (646-794) Buddhism had gradually adapted in Japan to the native spirituality, incorporated the form of Shinto and become firmly entrenched at the top social levels in Japan. By the end of the Nara period, Buddhism had also been largely accepted by the Japanese elite and had become closely connected with the politics of the times.

At the beginning of the Heian Period (794-1185) the Capital of Japan, which had been in Nara, was transferred to what is now the current city of Kyoto. One reason for transferring the capital was to try to disassociate politics from the ecclesiastic dignitaries that were already entrenched in Nara. But Buddhism soon became entrenched in Kyoto as well.

In 788 the Tendai School was formalized by the monk Saicho (767-822) with the establishment of Enryakuji Monastery on Mt. Hiei to the northeast of the capital. The School of Tendai incorporated elements of Zen and esoteric Buddhism, which Saicho had brought back from China. Although opposed by the Buddhist centers in Nara, which used Theravada precepts for ordination, imperial approval for the new sect was finally given in 823, just after Saicho's death. This initiated the development of Mahayana Buddhism in Japan.

Tendai became one of two powerful sects in Japan and established great Buddhist centers throughout the country. Chief among these was Enryakuji on Mt. Hiei. Enryakuji grew into a great fortress monastery during the Heian period, coming to include thousands of buildings and to hold considerable influence. Enryakuji became the center for the scholarly study of Buddhism. It remained more elitist than Shingon, and was particularly popular with the Heian aristocracy. Tendai's pluralistic doctrine also made it a breeding ground for new sects: Japanese Zen and Pure Land Buddhism both originated as movements within Tendai.

During the same period, Shingon was established by the monk Kūkai (774-835). Kūkai went to China in 804 and studied Tantric practices in the city of Xi'an under Huiguo and returned with many texts and art works. In 819 he founded a monastery on Mount Koya, south of Kyoto, which became a great Shingon center. His personal prestige as an artist and intellectual helped the spread of the sect. The beautiful mandalas, magnificent statuary, and ritual and mysticism as well as elaborate ceremonial in Shingon temples made worship an enjoyable and edifying spectacle. Its emphasis on ritual found support in the Kyoto nobility, particularly in the ruling Fujiwara clan. Furthermore, simplified versions of Shingon mantras and mudras became folk charms for seeking fortune and averting evil and were thus popular with more of the masses than the more esoteric practice of the Tendai. Supplanting earlier sects, Shingon enjoyed as much or more popular support as its great rival, Tendai.

Both Tendai and Shingon were granted large tracts of land by the government from which the temples received taxes (shoen). As the monastic complexes grew, so did the willingness of the inhabitants to actively involve themselves in temporal affairs, or rather, to deal with issues in a very temporal manner. As the sects accumulated great wealth and political power, many established armies for defense of their holdings, which were by this time extensive; but leading up to the 11th Century, the armies of both temples and individual secular clans began to be used for offense as well. The armed monks and lay-brothers of Mount Hiei were known, especially in the lawless days of late Heian (late 11th-12th centuries), to descend from their monasteries to threaten the government or simply to loot. Schisms within Tendai also led to armed feuds between temples on Mount Hiei. This was concurrent with a steady accumulation of wealth and a corruption of the priesthood in both sects.

The early Heian period was also Japan's golden age of culture; the Japanese court reached a pinnacle of art, literature and poetry. At the beginning of the period (8th and 9th centuries) the leisure classes were patterning themselves after the Chinese – using Chinese written characters, fashions and adopting their religion, Buddhism. During the later part of the period a renaissance of indigenous Japanese art and literature occurred. The court was the center of this great blossoming of culture and the center of civil power in Japan. Power was primarily held by the ruling emperors and their regents, the powerful Fujiwara clan. Late in the period, when lawlessness was increasing and wars were being fought, the Fujiwara clan found itself in the unenviable position of not being able to control these feudal and monastic military groups. This then led to provincial warriors asserting their power and, in 1185, finally supplanting the Fujiwara with a military government (Bakufu/Shogunate) in Kamakura, near present day Tokyo. Power became concentrated in the hands of the Kamakura Shogunate (1192-1333) and a period of feudal estates ensued.

During the Kamakura period (1185-1336), a new breed of leaders would emerge who rebelled against the aristocratic culture of the preceding Heian Period (794-1185). Power came into the hands of the dictatorship of the Minamoto Clan, who practiced more austerity. By moving to Kamakura, they were removed from the luxury life and lax administration of the court nobles in Kyoto, who were now more figureheads rather than power brokers. The political corruption of the Fujiwara family, the exploitation of the peasantry and the Buddhism of the late Heian period, which catered to the establishment, were losing favor. Buddhism in Japan had lost some of its essence. Buddhist practice had become closely associated with royalty and the power structure of

the times and had not filtered down to the common layperson. Ceremonial had become formula. Thus the Buddhism that was being taught in Japan had been diluted.

This was the political and religious climate into which Dogen was born. The son of a noble family, Dogen's father, Kuga Michichika, was a high-ranking government minister in Kyoto. His father died when he was 2 and his mother when he was 7. Searching for the meaning of birth and death, he entered the priesthood at 13 and began his studies on Mt. Hiei - still the center of scholastic Buddhism in medieval Japan. His master, Abbot Koen, taught both Hinayana and Mahayana. Here Dogen studied the Tendai doctrines, which had existed in Japan since the 8th century.

Dogen could not find what he yearned for there, so he followed his heart to study with Eisai-Zenji (1141-1215) who had brought Rinzaï Zen from China to Japan and had established a school in Kyoto in 1204. This school, Kennin-ji Monastery, was the first monastery in the capital in which Zen was the primary teaching. His discipleship was cut short after only one year by the death of Eisai-Zenji, whereupon he continued to study with Eisai-Zenji's eldest disciple, Myozen. He studied eight more years with Myozen and, at the age of 24, in 1223, he accompanied Myozen to China. What Dogen found in China had not yet been transmitted to Japan.

Buddhism itself had penetrated into China from Central Asia by the beginning of the Christian Era (CE), 500 years after the death of the Buddha. Mahayana Buddhism (The Great Vehicle) was already in China when Dhyana Buddhism was introduced by Bodhidharma (P'u't'i-ta-mo or Tamo or Bodaidaruma) sometime during his lifetime, which is believed to be 470 – 543. (Dhyana Buddhism is a general name for all Buddhist schools that practice and place particular emphasis on the practice of meditation.) Before Bodhidharma arrived, Buddhism was already firmly established with a local fusion of Taoism. At that time the Chinese language did not "possess conceptual apparatus adequate for the abstract thought of Buddhism and therefore translations had to have recourse to the terminology of Taoism" (*Shambala Dictionary p.34*). This led to some confusion in which Buddhism was thought to be the same as Taoism, but nevertheless also helped in the spread of Buddhism.

To this mix Bodhidharma added instruction on the Sutras and an emphasis on sitting meditation. The Dhyana School was thus adopted by the Chinese, who transliterated the word to Ch'an. By the sixth Ch'an patriarch, Hui-neng, (Daikan Eno / Sokei Eno) Zen already had a clear expression in China. The emphasis was not on scholarship nor on ritual but could be described as a "special transmission outside the orthodox teaching" or "the transmission from heart-mind to heart-mind."

By the time Dogen arrived in China during the Sung Dynasty (10th – 13th century), only Ch'an (Zen) and Pure Land remained of the many schools that had been established, partially due to persecution of the monasteries in earlier years, and through a degeneration of some branches into philosophy. In China, the Ch'an tradition had branched into five schools: Soto, Ummon, Hogen, Igyo and Rinzaï. At various times monks brought the teachings of these schools to Korea and Japan. They differed in training details and style but not in essential content. Although "the Soto School in China had made little showing in its early years of development" (*Soto Zen p. 47*) we know the term "Soto" Zen had been in use in China since around 910 – 920 CE and had greatly increased in popularity by 1200 CE. (Soto is an amalgamation of the characters Ts'ao and T'ung, hence the Tsao-tung school of Ch'an, and later, Soto Zen.)

Dogen and Myozen traveled extensively to many great teaching monasteries until they finally arrived at T'ien-t'ung (Tendo-zan) Monastery. Myozen died at Tendo-ji in 1225 but Dogen found a new master in T'ien-t'ung Ju-ching (Tendo Nyojo) where he finally found the complete liberation he had been searching for. He was able to study only a few years with Tendo Nyojo, but received the Dharma Transmission, at the age of 28, before the death of his master. Thereafter he decided to return to Japan and propagate Nyojo's teaching – what we call the practice of Soto Zen.

Initially Dogen returned to Kennin-ji monastery, but after more than 10 years there and at Kosho-ji, he felt he was too close to the center of worldly power; so, in order to withdraw more fully, he moved to the Echizen Mountains of Fukui Prefecture where, in 1243, he founded Eihei-ji. Eihei-ji was to become one of the two great Soto Zen teaching temples still existing in Japan today. Although Dogen brought the teaching of Soto Zen to Japan, it is likely that the term Soto was not used in Japan until the time of Keizan Jokin (known as the Mother of Zen) because Dogen eschewed the use of segregationist names.

What was the essence of the teaching that Dogen learned? The main characteristics are:

- 1) All have Buddha Nature at birth and are already Enlightened;
- 2) You can enjoy fully the bliss of the Buddha Nature through Zazen; (we use the term Serene Reflection Meditation);
- 3) Training and Enlightenment are one;
- 4) Strict discipline of religious ceremony and the application of temple regulations must be practiced and internalized by all and applied to everyday activities. (*Soto Zen p. 47*)

What teachings did Dogen especially emphasize in establishing the Soto Sect?

- 1) There is no such thing as separate schools of Buddhism. Dogen said: "Those who use the name Zen School to describe the great Way of the Buddha and the Ancestors have not yet seen the Way of the Buddha. The establishment of the five schools of Zen is nothing other than the destruction of the unity of Buddhism. It is the product of shallow thinking." He tried to put sectarianism back on a unified course. What is important is "correctly transmitted Buddhism" not what one calls it.
- 2) Buddhism can be truly found with a wholehearted practice of Zazen and not an intellectual understanding of scriptures. Training and Enlightenment are one and the same. Serene Reflection Meditation is the complete liberation of body and mind so that the whole self becomes the Dharma. "I was, am and will be enlightened instantaneously with the universe."
- 3) The essence of the Buddha, Buddha Nature, is in all men and all things. Meditation itself is an act of faith in the Buddha Nature. We are all enlightened. "In 'Bussho-no-Maki' a chapter in the Shobogenzo, Dogen explains: 'The Buddha Nature is everything, one part of which we call humanity. Within humanity and outside of it everything is the Buddha Nature.'" Everything has Buddha Nature – It has no form and yet manifests itself in all forms. "You are not him but he is all of you."
- 4) True Buddhism, based on direct experience of the truth, did not exist in Japan so he went to China to find it. The recorded word of the Buddha can point the way, but the ancestral line – the uninterrupted direct succession of master to

disciple – wherein the spirit is handed down from one to the next is what Dogen sought. “This Transmission is not based on historical studies, but stands firmly on deep faith.” It is the pouring of water from one vessel to another – neither increasing nor decreasing (*Soto Zen p. 58-68*).

Dogen - like other notable monks such as Saicho, Rinzai and Nichiren - was a man of his times. What he taught was characterized less by ceremony and mystery but more by faith and piety and spiritual exercises of the era he was born into. He was influenced by and built upon what had gone before. Dogma gave way to personal experience, ritual to piety and intuition. He wrote in Japanese, not the intellectually popular script of China, so that all could read it. He cut across class boundaries and made the teaching available to all, thus discrediting much of the prestige the old system had cultivated and teaching that there is no difference between the meditations of the rich and poor or men and women.

Keido Chisan Koho Zenji says in his book *Soto Zen* that Dogen had a profundity of thought, combined with a deep practicality, and a modest but honorable character that all combined to make him a man able to communicate what he had learned and respected by those who learned from him. Dogen’s teachings are so highly valued by scholars because “his philosophy, religion and personality are in perfect accord with the ideals held by humanity throughout history, possess broad objectivity, and are universally applicable” (*Soto Zen p.51*).

Dogen was the stern father. He lived simply. He was a profound scholar who rejected worldly honors. He established the rules for daily living, and brought into prominence the teaching that Zen regulations must be grasped thoroughly with mind *and* body to be able to understand them fully. He was an intellectual who taught that knowledge is not the way, but that through intense training the Dharma can become your “blood and bones.” He wrote and delivered many great sermons, most of them recorded in his masterpiece of 95 chapters, *the Shobogenzo*, but taught personal transmission from Master to Disciple. Dogen found that training and enlightenment are the same. “Since training embraces enlightenment, the very beginning of training contains the whole of original enlightenment” (*Soto Zen p.134*).

Rev. Master Jiyu taught that for Dogen “every act of daily life became an act of religious understanding” (*Zen is Eternal Truth p.xiii*). This is what Dogen has bequeathed to me. The understanding that ALL I do, ALL that happens to me and by me is training and contains the whole of enlightenment. “I was, am and shall be enlightened with all beings.”