

Dōgen's Instruction for Householder Zen Training

(*Eihei kōroku* V8.14)

Translated with introduction and notes by Dōshō Port

Introduction

Because this Dōgen dharma discourse (hōgo) was written for householders, includes examples of awakened householders, and offers instructions for householders, I've long been curious about it. After all, 99% or so of those engaged in Zen practice now are householders, yet much of the Zen narrative has monastics as the central figures and the instruction also seems directed to monastics.

So I recently dug into this Dōgen teaching for householders, translating my own version. You'll find the translation attached in the pdf, following these introductory comments.

1. The *Eihei kōroku* and this dharma discourse

The hōgo that I'm talking about can be found in *Dogen's Extensive Record (Eihei kōroku)*, Volume 8, which also includes twenty informal talks Dōgen gave to students in his room and fourteen hōgo that were written out and addressed to various students. So they are intimate instructions. The hōgo in the spotlight in this essay and translation occurs as the fourteenth such dharma discourse in Volume 8.

Leighton and Okumura note this hōgo was probably "... written for Dōgen's main patron, Hatano Yoshishige (d. 1258), who was an official on a level comparable to 'ministers and generals.' Yoshishige, a nobleman with land in Echizen, later provided the land for Dōgen's monastery, Eiheiji."

Although a date is not given, it is speculated that it was delivered before 1243 when Dōgen left Kōshōji near present day Kyōto for what became Eiheiji, located deep in the mountains. If, indeed, this hōgo was offered by Dōgen to Hatano and friends before the move to Eiheiji, it serves to highlight the effectiveness of the discourse. It may have contributed to Hatano's aspiration to save Dōgen from a difficult situation in the big city with a large land grant and funds for a new monastery in the mountains.

Incidentally, this hōgo is one of the longest passages of any kind in *Eihei kōroku*, coming in at ~1300 words in my translation.

2. The main themes

In my view, the facts that this hōgo was written out by Dōgen himself (rather than a talk that an attendant listened to and then recorded after-the-fact, as is the case for much of *Eihei kōroku*) and that the audience to whom it was delivered was his main donor and their friends, adds considerably to the reliability that the message contained in this hōgo is Dōgen's.

His main themes for householder practice include:

- the importance of finding a true teacher
- the dangers of a false teacher
- the importance of working closely with and serving the teacher
- taking up a keyword and breaking through
- then integrating that breakthrough

In making these points, Dōgen seems to have constructed the text carefully and in the form of a spiral. That is, he repeats his themes while systematically moving his instruction progressively forward.

Before translating this hōgo, I had been aware that in Section 5, Dōgen recommends a kōan for householders, saying, "...When you meet a dharma master, first ask for a single kōan case, then you must straightforwardly pay attention, diligently keep it in mind, and practice vigorously."

A big surprise for me was in how Dōgen amplifies this theme in Section 8, saying, "First, awaken 'withered tree, dead ash.' Next, use a bamboo staff and all day long, month after month, knock it all into one." My translation highlights the method aspect here more clearly than other translators who, as far as I know, have not had first person experience working with kōan with a teacher.

For me, as someone who has been through the Harada-Yasutani kōan *shitsunai* - and I suspect for anyone who's done similar work - it is vividly clear that Dōgen is moving from a general recommendation for kōan in Section 5 to a specific keyword (話頭, huàtóu) here, "withered tree, dead ash." Dōgen then continues by recommending what we now call post-satori training with, "Next, use a bamboo staff and all day long, month after month, knock it all into one."

In terms of main themes, another surprise is that in this pithy summary of the Zen path for householders, Dōgen says nothing about zazen. He also says nothing about the practice that the Post Meiji Sōtō Orthodoxy claims that he advocated - *shikantaza*. Doesn't that seem odd? If you had a chance to give a talk to a group of wealthy and powerful folks who might just be willing to build you a new monastery, wouldn't you give them the straight scoop about what you thought was most important about the buddhadharma?

Likewise, when Dōgen does give specific instruction for zazen in his several versions of the "Fukanzazengi" ("Universal Recommendations for Zazen") and "Zazenshin" ("Needle Point of Zazen") he also does not use the word *shikantaza* a single time. If you were giving zazen some new spin, wouldn't you name it in the texts dedicated to zazen?

In these ways and others, this hōgo does not harmonize well with what is said to be Dōgen's teaching in our times, much of which is poisonous pablum spewed about by well-meaning but poorly-informed Sōtō practitioners and teachers about the heart of Dōgen Zen. One dynamic that might be at play is mistaking Dōgen's novel, creative style of expression for a novel, creative meaning that runs contrary to the Zen tradition. However, in all of Dōgen's

works, he clearly and repeatedly aligns his message with that of all the buddhas and ancestors.

3. A pedagogical puzzle

You will find, unsurprisingly for Dōgen, that this hōgo is quite dense, like really rich dark chocolate, but that it also moves straight to the heart of the great matter. Indeed, Dōgen's shining confidence that householders can plumb the depths of the buddhadharma illuminates the entire discourse - if they're not lazy, that is.

In Section 4, for example, Dōgen runs through six examples of past householders who practiced diligently and woke up. It reminds me of Torei's whirlwind tour of his Rinzai lineage in *The Inexhaustible Lamp of the Zen School*, "Chapter 1: Concerning the Lineage of Our School." Like Torei, Dōgen's references are almost in shorthand. It's like Dōgen and Torei are calling out family stories to those who have heard them many times, "Remember the time Uncle Joe's canoe tipped over on Lake One?" And everybody chuckles.

If the practitioners Dōgen was addressing could follow this, they were indeed deeply steeped in the Zen narrative. Yet, even a Zen priest I know who I consider to be really steeped could identify only three of the six examples (yours truly identified two of six). It is possible, though, that Hatano and friends had previous training with the Daruma-shu who had a monastery in Echizen, near Hatano's family holdings. The Daruma-shu preceded Dōgen's movement in Japan and were already using the Zen narrative in the late 1100's. However, I've seen no evidence that Hatano had such connections.

In my view, it seems very unlikely that in ~1240, Japan, Dōgen's householder listeners would have much of an inkling of what he was talking about, especially in this example. Which raises the puzzle about Dōgen's pedagogy: Given that he cites past householders who awakened deeply in the Way with the clear intention of inspiring his householder listeners to undertake Zen training, why did he speak in an abbreviated manner so that they could hardly follow along?

It could be that there was more to the hōgo presentation than we have recorded. For example, Dōgen could have stopped and unpacked the references, going into detail for his listeners - but there is no evidence of this either.

What seems most likely to me is that Dōgen expected his listeners to do the work to meet him where he was at, rather than the contemporary style of the listeners expecting the teacher to do the work to meet them where they're at. Dōgen seems to choose establishing a correct relationship with householder students over his interest in being fully understood. This fits with Dōgen's stance within the text. His advice for his householder students is to meet a true teacher and then "...stay close and serve them for three-five years."

4. This hōgo and other Dōgen texts

It is notable that Dōgen's much more well-known *Genjokoan* (*Actualizing the Fundamental Point*) was also written for a householder. Another similarity with *Genjokoan* and this hōgo is that both conclude with a kōan that embodies Dōgen's meaning and powerfully inspires practice awakening.

However, in the case of *Genjokoan*, one of Dōgen's first writings very early in his teaching career, the last words are positive and inspirational: "Since the wind's nature is ever present, the wind of the Buddha's family enables us to realize the gold of the great Earth and to transform the long river into cream."

This hōgo comes after about a decade of teaching. Now we find Dōgen with a stern (and perhaps even crabby) ending, "Who will obtain the understanding of true emptiness and pull the fish from the water if they are lazy again and again?"

There are other differences as well. In *Genjokoan*, Dōgen demonstrates the clarity and depth of the awakened perspective, but offers little about method. The present hōgo is also steeped in the awakened perspective, of course, but has much to say about method. In that way, it is much more like Dōgen's *Gakudō yōjinshū* ("Points to Watch in Buddhist Training"), which was written as a guidebook for monastics.

I encourage you to read through this text slowly, working through the entire hōgo a few times before going back and checking the notes. Read from the belly of the breath body. Allow the breath to be smooth and subtle. Read to read and let understanding come of its own accord, not forcing it to arrive by straining the frontal lobe.

Eihei kōroku Volume 8.14 Translation

1. Ministers and generals¹ who study the Way, first inquire of a teacher. Depending on whether the teacher is false or true, the student's self understanding will be twisted or straight. Therefore, one practitioner turned away from the place of selecting government officials, and went to the place for selecting Buddhas. Thus, an empty mind passed the imperial exam.² Inquire directly from superior teachers, directly obtain their understanding. Don't serve as the companion for the ten thousand dharmas.³ Before one heard the three calls,⁴ they had broken through subtle karmic impressions.⁵ An authentic teacher influences the expression of the power of compassion.

2. If you get close to a false teacher, the results will not be like this. If you dutifully, blindly follow the confused mind of a false teacher, it will be like watching a tree stump, waiting for a rabbit; like grasping a rock, thinking it is a precious gem. You will fall into a ghost cave and wander destitute into a demon's pit. If you meet a true teacher, resolve to practice inquiry, be determined to have insight into the great matter, thoroughly drop through what's been your old nest. Who says that diligent practice (功夫, J. kufū) is not yet this very occasion?

3. Yet a clear-eyed ancestral teacher is difficult to encounter and difficult to understand. Most importantly, even though you gain an encounter, it is their wisdom that is most difficult. You might hear their words, and not maintain their conduct; see their conduct, yet I fear you will miss their realization. If you do not practice attending them well, how can you attain the capacity to be free in *this*? Moreover, even in China, a person who masters buddhadharma is rare. In our remote location, is it easy to attain? In former times, there were few; nowadays, how many are there? Even though many get to Treasure Mountain, most cannot distinguish jade from stone, so what good is it?⁶ Connected through causes and conditions, disciples toil, running fast to get it outside, not yet understanding, "turn around,

¹ Ministers and generals" probably refers to Dōgen's main patron, Hatano Yoshishige (d. 1258) and his associates.

² This is a reference to Dānxiá Tiānrán, a successor of Shítóu Xīqiān. As a young man and avid scholar, Dānxiá was on his way to take the civil service exam when he had a dream of white light filling his room. A fortune teller told him this was an omen of resolving emptiness. He then met a monk who referred him to Mǎzǔ who then referred him on to Shítóu. There are many instances of practitioners going back and forth from Mǎzǔ to Shítóu and from Shítóu to Mǎzǔ.

³ Mǎzǔ told the Layman Páng, "Don't serve as the companion for the ten thousand dharmas," in other words, don't linger in witness consciousness.

⁴ "Before one heard the three calls..." refers to the following kōan: "The National Teacher called his attendant three times. Three times the attendant answered. The National teacher said, 'Requesting you to speak, I thought I was letting you down. Turns out, the fact is that you were letting me down.'" *No Gate Barrier*, "Case 17: The National Teacher's Three Calls."

⁵ In "...They had broken through subtle karmic impressions," "They" probably refers to the attendant that had already broken through before the teacher's call. "Subtle karmic impressions," 一点, "refers to the extremely subtle remaining karmic impressions that which impede the practices of bodhisattvas. It is the one speck that remains after a transformative kensho that is addressed through the calling of the Way.

⁶ Treasure Mountain" (C. Bǎoshān, 寶山): "... a Buddhist site in the Taihang mountain range in Henan Province. It is a network of cave-shrines, devotional and memorial inscriptions, reliquary niches with portrait-statues, and references to buildings and restorations." Presumably, it was an ancient pilgrimage site. Dōgen seems to be using the phrase literally as well metaphorically (a characteristic of Dōgen), suggesting that it is a mistake to focus on the beautiful scenery of the dharma journey, or perhaps the dharma milieu, as the goal.

take the backward step.” Facing this side, asking about one, but they’ve not yet broken through two. Facing that side, asking about two, but how would they know they’ve fallen into three. Both sides are entirely mistaken, vainly passing one’s whole life - this is truly pitiful and we should feel compassion for such people.

4. Your choice is between a false teacher who will have prejudiced, stale means of escape and a true teacher who will break through established patterns and hesitation. Revered bodhisattvas who aspire to study the Way, join the search for a master of the dharma - but do not get unsettled. You should transmit the family style of Yáng Wéngōng⁷ - then how could there be no fruit from Lǐ?⁸ Péixiū threw himself into the hands of Guīfēng and also destroyed the mud ball with Huángbò’s one call and his “Yes!”⁹ response. Yúdí went up Zīyù, and then manifested even more [lotus] flower light due to Yàoshān’s skillful means and completely awakened.¹⁰ Going back and forth from Jiāngxī to Shítou, [Layman Páng’s] power polished and clarified the bright mirror.¹¹ Going to and inquiring into Guāngzhái and Dānyuán, formerly Sùzōng distinguished jade from stone.¹² Because wise people of old demonstrated such incessant effort, they can also illuminate trainees today.

5. Honored bodhisattvas, when you meet a dharma master, first ask for a single kōan case, then you must straightforwardly pay attention, diligently keep it in mind, and practice vigorously. The mountain exhausted, the ocean dried up, you will penetrate perfectly with nothing lacking. Standing in the snow [like Huike], attaining the dharma, and negotiating the Way for eight years without being lazy. Pounding rice [like Huineng], transmitting the robe, doing diligent, vigorous practice for eight months.

6. If you meet a virtuous person and consider them to be high caliber, why not stand out from the crowd, rise and come forward. If you understand and are determined to achieve the lofty, do not hesitate. Now we see worldly people coming to investigate with an eminent monk, but before one question is worked through, they delight in raising something else. Or

⁷ Yáng[yi] Wéngōng (974-1020): A successor of Shōushān Shěngniàn (15th generation in China, Linji line). Yángyi was a high ranking government official, a poet, and practiced with several great teachers. He was an editor of the important *Jīngdé Chuāndēnglù* (*Records of the Transmission of the Lamp*, J. Keitoku Dentōroku). It is notable that Dōgen tells his listeners to “transmit the family style of Yáng[yi] Wéngōng,” given that Yáng[yi]’s family style was the Linji lineage. Shoushan Xingnian is a shared ancestor with Dōgen’s Huanglong Linji line and today’s Japanese Rinzai lineage.

⁸ Lǐ Zunxu (988-1038) a successor of one of Shōushān Shěngniàn successors, known as “Stable Master Lǐ,” was a co-editor of the *Records of the Transmission of the Lamp* - which might be the fruit that Dōgen refers to here.

⁹ Péixiū (797-870) was another well-known political person. He first studied with the important Guīfēng Zōngmì and later with Huángbò Xīyùn. He edited *The Record of the Sayings of Huángbò*.

¹⁰ Yúdí (d. 818) was a prime minister who studied with Ziyu Daotong, a successor of Mǎzǔ Dàoyī. According to Leighton and Okumura, “When he first met Ziyu, Yúdí asked about the section near the beginning of the *Lotus Sutra*, Chapter 25, about Kannon saving those who were blown to the land of human-eating demons. When Yúdí asked the meaning of this, Ziyu scolded him, ‘What’s the use of asking that?’ When Yúdí paled in shame, Ziyu said, ‘This is falling into the land of human-eating demons.’ Later Yúdí asked, ‘What is Buddha?’ Ziyu called Yúdí’s name, and when Yúdí responded, Ziyu said, ‘Don’t seek apart from this.’ Later, Yaoshan Weiyan commented that he would have instead responded to Yúdí’s acknowledgment by saying, ‘What is this?’” Dōgen’s comment that Yúdí “...then manifested even more [lotus] flower light,” is a reference to the *Lotus Sutra*, the subject of Yúdí’s work with Ziyu.

¹¹ Layman Páng (740-808), one of the most celebrated householders in the Zen tradition. He went back and forth between Jiāngxī (aka, Mǎzǔ) and Shítou, and also spent years with Yàoshān, a successor of Shítou. Layman Páng appears in several kōans in the classical collections

¹² Sùzōng (711-762), aka, Emperor Sùzōng. A student of the National Teacher Nányáng Huìzhōng and Dānyuán Yīngzhēn. He appears in *Blue Cliff Record*, Case 18 and Case 99.

they withdraw, pretending to understand, but actually cannot speak. If only one-third of an old case has been presented, how could they understand the Way fully? Or they might say that buddhadharma is difficult to comprehend. Or that it isn't their thing. They wander on a mistaken path, and vainly miss the Great Way. Shouldn't we have concern for beings like this? Even in the secular world, there is the gracious invitation of Huá with speech that flowed like the wind rides the clouds.¹³ And how did Buddha point directly to the absolute while remaining silent?¹⁴ A bit of iron has the virtue of pure gold. They transform all living beings. Do not measure and compare how this can be - do not neglect this. If, for a while, you examine the strength of snow and frost, you will know for yourself the purity of pine and cypress. Further, take one step and leap over the double barrier. Noble ones, do you not trust this yet? Just now, one word reveals ten thousand clear and evident truths.

7. Moreover, the ancestral artisans of the great dharma of all buddhas have boundless suitable methods to reach the other shore, who can measure them? Disciples should diligently purify their hearts; eminent monks should not wait [to cut through] the blown hair with vigor.¹⁵ Therefore, at Shàolín in former times, an arm was cut off and the ancestor's marrow was received;¹⁶ Jùzhī is also well-known for chopping off the boy's finger and seeing blood.¹⁷ With the mysterious wind of Shàolín, we awaken from the endless night of mad sleep! Knowing well Jùzhī's blood vein, doubt about the root cause [of suffering] must be cut off! What is called asking about the dharma is itself the mouth asking and the mouth answering, the body asking and the body answering, the mind asking and the mind answering. If you don't know this, don't dare ask about the dharma. If monks don't know this, how could they serve as teachers? Only memorizing passages from the scriptures in order to be a teacher for humans and gods is the work of a great thief spoiling the wealth of dharma! Do not get close to such people. Recognize them as teachers, and it will not end well!

8. Vigorous people who study and practice Zen: You absolutely must meet a dharma teacher who, through right view, embodies the Way. Then stay close and serve them for three-five years. Ask for their instructions for body, speech, and mind; carefully, precisely

¹³ "Huá" refers to a border guard, described in the Chinese classic, *Zhuangzi*, who was an eloquent speaker but unappreciated by an emperor he encountered.

¹⁴ A reference to a famous story, this version from the *No Gate Barrier*, Case 32: Buddha Speaks to an Outsider's Question One outside the path asked the World Honored One, "Disregard having words, disregard having no words." The World Honored One remained silent. The one outside the path praised and admired, saying "The World Honored One's great compassion and great pity, opened my cloud of confusion and caused me to obtain entry." Thus, having bowed, he left.

¹⁵ Yunmen asked Baling, "What is the blown-hair sword?" Baling said, "Each branch of coral touches the moon."

¹⁶ The Second Ancestor, Huìkē, who famously cut off his arm to express his sincerity to Bodhidharma.

¹⁷ *No Gate Barrier*, Case 3: Juzhi Raises A Finger: "Every time Juzhi was asked a question, he only raised one finger. Later there was a boy who when asked what the master taught, also raised a finger. Juzhi heard about this, and with a knife cut off the boy's finger. The boy howled in pain and wept, running away. Juzhi called after him, and the boy turned his head. Juzhi raised a finger. At that, the boy suddenly was awakened."

follow their instructions for body, speech, and mind. First, awaken 'withered tree, dead ash.'¹⁸ Next, use a bamboo staff and all day long, month after month, knock it all into one.¹⁹ Round and smooth like a pearl rolling without exhausting the limits. How would one not become a true buddha lion?!

9. Haven't you seen, "Huángtíng Jiān practiced with and served Zen master Huìtáng Bǎojié."²⁰ Tǎng said, 'Don't use deliberative thinking to conjecture. How could I conceal it? How?' Jiān hesitated. Tǎng said, 'Just now you are involved in hesitation. Then just become surplus dharma.' Jiān investigated like this for two years in order to get to the bottom of the matter, but still had not found a place to enter. One day, Tǎng and Tíng Jiān were strolling along the shore of a pond. Tǎng said, 'The lotus flowers in this pond are so fragrant.' Jiān agreed, saying, 'Lotus flowers are fragrant.' Tang said, 'Not concealing it from you, how?' Jiān suddenly awakened." [Dōgen said:] This is truly the power of practice to get to the bottom of the matter. Who will obtain the understanding of true emptiness and pull the fish from the water if they are lazy again and again?

¹⁸ With "withered tree, dead ash," Dōgen employs a saying of Shíshuāng Qìngzhū (807-888) as a keyword (話頭, huàtóu). Shíshuāng was a third generation successor of Shítóu Xīqiān (700-790), who once said, "Stop; rest; one *nen*, ten-thousand years; become cold ash, withered tree; practice going as one strip of white." This phrase is also included in an important kōan we now deal with deep into the Harada Yasutani *shitsunai*, in *Record of Going Easy*, Case 96: Jiufeng Does Not Agree. Shíshuāng's saying, including the snippet "withered tree, dead ash," is sometimes regarded as an expression of deep absorption (aka, samadhi), the one color gained through completely surrendering to the form of zazen. By the way, "withered trees" is also the name given to some ascetics who sat in meditation, never lying down, like petrified rocks and withered trees. Dōgen, though, urges his listeners to "awaken 'withered tree, dead ash.'" So rather than a one-chopstick dharma of absorption, Dōgen teaches the same wisdom-absorption (prajna-samadhi) that Hóngzhì Zhēngjué (1091-1157) and Wànsōng Xíngxiù (1166-1246) present in *Record of Going Easy*, Case 96: Jiufeng Does Not Agree. It is also in accord with the Sixth Ancestor's statement in the *Platform Sutra*, "The words 'samadhi' and 'prajna' are different, but samadhi and prajna are one essence and are not two" (trans. Alan Gregory Wonderwheel).

¹⁹ The *shippei* is about three feet in length with a slight bow. It is made from bamboo splints and wrapped together with wisteria - entangling vines, one might say. In modern times, it is the staff used by the head monk to knock the floor when they meet students for dharma encounters. But in Dōgen's time, the *shippei* was probably the staff held by the dharma teacher (like himself) when giving a dharma discourse, knocking the floor to make a point. If so, it was the implement at hand, meeting and becoming one with the body, speech, and mind of just now. Dōgen uses the *shippei* as the embodiment of that process of becoming one, for the dharma implement of body, speech, and mind to meet and knock the separation outta body, speech and mind.

²⁰ The student in the kōan, Huángtíng Jiān (1045-1105), was a well-known poet and a government minister. Thus, he was a householder like the people in Dōgen's audience for this dharma discourse. The Zen master in the kōan, Huìtáng Bǎojié (1025-1100), is also known as Huìtáng Zǔxīn. He was a 19th-generation-in-China Linji master in the Huánglóng line. In fact, he was one of Dōgen's ancestors in the Linji/Rinzai line that Dōgen carried and transmitted. Because the various branches of the independent Huánglóng lineage died out in both China and Japan, those who presently hold the Sōtō lineage with its dual Rinzai and Sōtō branches, are the only living successors of Huìtáng.