

# Soto Zen in Japan

## **Introduction**

Since the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (MZMC) is a lineage within the international Soto Zen Buddhist school, members of the MZMC sangha should have some familiarity with the school as it first appeared and developed in Japan.<sup>1</sup>

## **Physical Geography of Japan**

In understanding the origin, growth, and geographical distribution of Buddhism in Japan, it is helpful to have some knowledge of the country's physical geography.<sup>2</sup> Japan is an archipelago extending roughly 1,869 miles northeast-southwest and 1,022 miles southeast-northwest. It is composed of more than 1000 islands, the main islands from east to west being Hokkaido, Honshu (considered the mainland), Shikoku, and Kyushu. About seventy-three percent of the archipelago is mountainous and rugged, with a mountain range running through each of the main islands. The population is concentrated in the twenty-seven percent of the archipelago consisting of scattered plains and inter-mountain basins, all of which are of limited size. The islands short, steep, swift rivers are generally unsuited for navigation except near their lower reaches. Japan is for the most part a rainy, humid country with a cool temperate climate in the north and a subtropical to tropical climate in the south. It is volcanically active, with as many as 1000 earthquakes a year. The archipelago is about 125 miles slightly east of the Korean Peninsula across the Sea of Japan and 500 miles east-northeast across the East China Sea from China.

## **Origins of Buddhism in Japan (c.552-1185)**

According to the early eighth century *Chronicles of Japan (Nihon shoki)*, Buddhism was introduced to Japan in 552 as part of an alliance-building endeavor with Japan by King

Song of Korea.<sup>3</sup> However, the movement of people, items, and concepts between Japan, Korea, and China was already at that time part of an active China Sea interactive sphere that began in the third century.<sup>4</sup> It seems likely then that Buddhists and elements of Buddhism had already entered the archipelago earlier in the sixth century, if not earlier in the fourth or third century, but this time through person-to-person (e.g., immigrant, trader) contact. Buddhism arrived in Japan during a period of competition between extended families or clans, who were competing for political dominance. By the late sixth century, the powerful Soga extended family had built a nascent Buddhist monastic system in the Yamato area of southeastern Honshu (the area around today's Sakai city in Nara prefecture).<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the seventh century, a national temple system was developed in order to control the hundreds of temples being built as Buddhism spread outward from the Yamato area. In the same period six state-sponsored doctrinal study centers were established, each with a different doctrinal focus. The six, later called the Nara schools, were Hosso (Yogacara), Kegon (Huayan), Ritsa (precepts), Sanron (emptiness), Jojitsu (denial of the existence of mind and body), and Kusha (*Abhidharmakosa*). In 803 these centers were codified into formal schools. Two new schools were later added: Tendai (with a focus on the Lotus Sutra) founded by Saicho (767-822) and Shingon (with a focus on esoteric teachings) founded by Kukai (774-835), both of whom had traveled to China to bring back new Buddhist ideas and practices. Their inclusion set the stage for the subsequent introduction of other new schools, such as Pure Land and Zen.

### **The Medieval Period (1185-1603)**

Although Dogen (1200-1253) is recognized today as the initial founder of the Soto Zen school of meditation in Japan, Zen priests and many elements of Buddhist meditation were present in Japan before Dogen's time. For instance, Dosho (629-700) traveled to China in 653 and on his return founded the first meditation hall in Japan in Nara; though exposed to Chan teachings in China Dosho was associated with the Hosso school (Yogacara) in Japan. The Chinese monks Daoxuan in the early 700s and Yigong in the early 800s brought Zen teachings to Japan, too. However, following a disastrous suppression of Buddhism in China in 845, among other problems, a three-century hiatus in travel between Japan and China for Buddhist practitioners followed. When travel resumed in the late 1100s, many Japanese traveled once again to China for teachings. Examples are Kakua (1142-?), who returned from China in c.1175 to propagate Rinzai Zen, and Eisai (1141-1215), originally a Tendai monk who returned from a second trip in 1191 (his first trip was in 1168) to found the Hoon Temple, Japan's first Zen (Rinzai) temple, in the remote southern island of Kyushu. Facing opposition from traditional schools, he moved to Kamakura in 1199 and founded Jufuku-ji temple, and in 1202 Kennin-ji temple in Kyoto, the capital at the time.

According to legend, Dogen was the illegitimate son of a noble father and mother, both of whom died before his eighth birthday.<sup>6</sup> At thirteen he joined the Tendai school of Buddhism on Mt. Hiei near Kyoto as an initiate. Becoming dissatisfied with the teachings he was receiving, he left Mt. Hiei in 1177 and studied with Myozen for six years at Kennin-ji monastery. He sailed to China in 1223 with Myozen to seek a more authentic Buddhism, a visit that lasted four years. After visiting several temples, he finally found answers to his questions, according to received tradition, from Ju-ching (1163-1228),

abbot of the Ching-te temple on Mt. T'ien-t'ung. Ju-ching was a master of Caodong teachings, a major school of Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism founded in China during the Tang dynasty (618-907). The teachings emphasized shikantaza, which is objectless meditation (Dogen's thinking not-thinking). Ju-ching gave Dogen Dharma transmission and inka (confirmation of the authenticity of a student's experience of awakening) in 1227.

Following his return to Japan in 1227, Dogen set about establishing his own school of teaching, naming it Soto, the Japanese pronunciation of Caodong. For the first six years following his return, he lived once again in Kennin-ji monastery. Although he eventually established his own monastery, Kosho-ji, south of Kyoto in 1233, he relocated to mountainous Echizen province, far north of Kyoto in 1243. The move may have been the result of his own desire to establish a monastery in a distant mountainous setting or growing tensions between his emphasis on "zazen only" and the Tendai community and Rinzai competitors. By 1246 he had begun the construction in the same province of Eihei-ji (Temple of Eternal Peace) monastery, which today is one of the two head temples of Soto Zen in Japan. He spent the remainder of his life there until the last months of his life, dying of illness in 1253 in Kyoto. Although Dogen is famous now, at the time he was not well known and was outside the mainstream of Japanese Buddhism. Nonetheless, his cloister at Eihei-ji conformed closely during his time there to the Song-style training he learned in China and architecturally the monastery followed the seven-hall layout of the Chinese Five Mountain system.<sup>7</sup> At the time, Rinzai Zen (samurai Zen in Japan) was more closely associated with the aristocracy and the capital Kyoto and Soto with the rural area around Eihei-ji and its inhabitants.

Dogen was succeeded at Eihei-ji by his disciple Ejo (1198-1280), who had joined him earlier at Koshoji. Like Dogen, Ejo adhered closely to the Song-style training Dogen had introduced. However, his successor Gikai (1219-1309), who had also joined Dogen at Koshoj, began to introduce practices that the surrounding rural inhabitants found more immediately useful than sitting Zen, such as magical rituals to relieve toothaches. These departures from Dogen's teachings and a leadership dispute soon embroiled Eihei-ji in controversy. After Gikai resigned as abbot, he eventually moved with his followers to the neighboring province of Kaga to become the second abbot of Daijo-ji temple. This marked the first geographical expansion of Dogen's Soto school.

The second great founder of Soto Zen in Japan was Keizan (1264-1325), who had followed Gikai to Daijo-jo to become its abbot himself in 1303.<sup>8</sup> Keizan enlarged the Shingon temple at Yoho-ji in Ishikawa prefecture, turning it into a Zen monastery in 1312, and, after inheriting the Shingon temple Shogahu-ji on the Noto Peninsula in 1322, he turned it into another Zen monastery named Soji-ji. In 1324 he put Gason Joseki (1276-1366) in charge of Soji-ji and returned to Yoho-ji, which had become his main temple. Under Gason Joseki's leadership, Soji-ji thrived, becoming the most influential center of the Soto School at the time. Like Gikai, Keizan and his followers added esoteric and other non-Dogen practices to their Soto Zen activities. Some sixty years after Dogen's death (ca.1313), five somewhat independent Soto Zen communities centered on monasteries existed: the Eihei-ji community in Echizen province, another community in the same province (the Hokyoji community), the community in Kaga (the Daijo-ji community), a community in Kyoto (the Yokoan community), and a community in

distant Kyushu to the south (the Daiji-ji community), where a seafaring port that many people used to depart for or arrive from China and Korea at the time was located.<sup>9</sup>

During the ensuing late medieval period (ca. 1325-1603), Cason Joseki's disciples founded more than twenty monasteries in seventeen provinces, most in the second half of the fourteenth century. These monasteries became in turn centers for further regional expansion. Eventually, the Onin War (1467-1477), which was a dispute over succession between warrior clans fought primarily within the imperial capital of Kyoto, led to the collapse of central authority and the devastation of most of the great Zen temples in the capital. This along with the political vulnerabilities of the ruling shogunate marks the end of the medieval period.

#### **Transition to the Modern Era (1603-1867)**

By the early sixteenth century, the number of Soto Zen temples had grown to several thousand and by the middle of the seventeenth century to some 17,500, making Soto Zen the largest Buddhist sect in Japan. The vast spurt in new growth was the result of a government mandated temple registration system that required every Japanese family to be registered at a Buddhist temple. The mandate was the result of anti-Christian campaigns and ordinances, the earliest dating to 1587.<sup>10</sup> Soto Zen priests were quick to take advantage of the mandatory registration system, building many thousands of new temples or upgrading others between 1620-1650, most in rural areas. To win the support of their parishioners, monks used non-Dogen-like activities, such as funeral services and memorial services for individual families, the distribution of Talisman to ward off harm, the recitation of ritual prayers for worldly benefit like rainmaking and financial success, and healing illness caused by angry spirits or bad karma.<sup>11</sup> Ninety-five percent of these

temples were parish temples, where few monks practiced meditation. As phrased by one scholar, “the vast majority of ordinary Sōtō Zen monks and laypeople never practiced Zen meditation, never engaged in iconoclastic acts of the Ch’an/Zen masters (as described in hagiographical literature), never solved *kōans*, never raked Zen gardens, never sought mystical meditative states, and never read Dōgen’s writings.”<sup>12</sup>

However, in contrast to what was happening at the parish temple level, Dogen was growing in status as textual authority at the central monastery level. In 1615 authorities decided that Eihei-ji’s standards should be the standards for all Soto Zen monks, which eventually meant the writings of Dogen. Reform attempts of monastic regulations and practices soon followed based on the understanding of Dogen at the time. Examples are Manzan Dokahu’s (1636-1714) appeal to change the rules of dharma transmission from one’s own moment of enlightenment to one’s personal initiation with a master (to preserve the lineage connection, as per Dogen and Ju-ching), and Geto Sokuchu’s (1729-1807), the eleventh abbot of Eihei-ji, attempt to purify the Soto school by returning it to Dogen’s conception of it, as Geto understood it. At the same time Menzan Zuiho (1683-1769) was writing commentaries on Dogen’s major texts and doctrines, and in the process creating what we now call Dogen Zen.<sup>13</sup>

Although often considered a period of Buddhist decline and corruption, Zen Buddhism was, in one scholar’s opinion, “as full of vitality during the Tokugawa period [1603-1867] as in any previous era, if not more so.”<sup>14</sup>

### **The Early Modern Era (1868-1945)**

When the Tokugawa shogunate (the administration of the Tokugawa regime) collapsed in a coup in 1867, the new Meiji regime (1868-1912) quickly made Shinto the state religion,

abandoned Japan's feudal system, returned the emperor to power, opened Japan up to Western modernism, instituted compulsory education and military conscription, and persecuted Buddhism. The charge was that Buddhism was a foreign funeral cult and a drain on public resources. In the ensuing crisis, tens of thousands of Buddhist temples were destroyed or closed, priests and nuns were forced to return to lay life, the temple registration system was replaced with a civil registration system (thus draining power from temple priests and nuns), and destroyed or sold material items like texts, works of art, and temple bells. However, within two decades Zen institutions had made themselves relevant once again to nation building by adopting a modern Western cast and recasting itself as a timeless philosophy that supported the uniqueness of Japan and the Japanese people.<sup>15</sup> In the process, like other orthodox Buddhist schools in Japan, Zen expressed strong, unconditional support for the militaristic state and became engaged in its war endeavors. The powerful military was involved in two Sino-Japanese wars (1894-1895, 1937-1941), the invasion of Taiwan (1895), the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), the invasion of Manchuria (1931-1932), and World War II (1941-1945), among other conflicts. Japan unconditionally surrendered on August 14, 1945, following the atomic bombing by the allies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>16</sup>

In the process of refashioning itself, Soto Zen enhanced the image of Dogen that Menzan Zuiho had begun in the eighteenth century. Dogen was cast as a powerful religious philosopher who was the very essence of Soto Zen, an image that persists among many Buddhist practitioners today.<sup>17</sup>



## **Soto Zen in Japan Since 1945**

Following the Pacific War, the Allies occupied Japan until 1952, during which time Japan was transformed into a democracy with a constitutional monarchy. Interest soon grew in the West for information about Zen, with Westerners like Philip Kapleau traveling to Japan for training and Japanese teachers going to the West to teach Zen meditation and philosophy.<sup>18</sup> Internally, Soto Zen teachers engaged in a wide-ranging debate about the failings of their school. Some criticized the state of Soto Zen at the time, pointing out that it had become funeral Zen, a type of Zen in which temples were a family business handed down from father to son.<sup>18</sup> Others criticized traditional Soto institutional practices, such as misogynic interpretations of karma (you are a woman, or poor or ill, because of bad deeds in previous lives), discrimination against the Baraka people (outcasts), misuse of the theory of original enlightenment, and unconditional (and enthusiastic) support of Japanese aggression during the Asia-Pacific War (1937-1945) and earlier.<sup>19</sup> These criticisms raised the question of whether there were errors in the Japanese understanding of Buddhism that led to these patterns of discrimination. One result was the emergence of the "Critical Buddhism" debate in which it was claimed that Zen (and Mahayana Buddhism) were not Buddhism.<sup>20</sup>

During this post-war period, patterns of writing in English about Zen emerged that readers should be aware of.<sup>21</sup> After the war and into the 1970s, most writers were concerned with the lives of the masters, with correct interpretation of doctrine, and with accurate translations of Japanese Zen texts, especially those of Dogen. Beginning in the 1990s, writers were more ready to challenge sectarian orthodoxy and to raise ethical issues about doctrine and institutional practice. Current writing is often a more explicit

attempt to place Zen within its historical-social-cultural-political context, and to be alert to the presence of orientalist tendencies (disingenuous Western presuppositions about the Orient) in their own and others writings.<sup>22</sup>

Today, Soto Zen remains the largest Zen Buddhist denomination in Japan, though its influence has greatly decreased among Japanese people in recent decades.<sup>23</sup>

### Notes

1. Be warned that the history of early Buddhism in Japan and of Dogen are undergoing change; so keep an open mind on these topics.
2. Totman (2014). When thinking about Japan's geography, it's helpful to have a good atlas at hand. Collcutt et al. (1991), from which the point-to-point distances between Japan and Korea and China are taken (p. 16), is recommended. Though the distances seem short, travel was often treacherous and travel routes much longer than the point-to-point distances cited here.
3. For an overview of the origins of Buddhism in Japan, see Deal and Ruppert (2015:13-86). For a general overview of Zen Buddhism in Japan, see Dumoulin (2005).
4. For the idea of a China Sea interaction sphere, see Piggott (1997).
5. For the five great Buddhist temples built in this area between 590 and 710, see McCallum (2009). The inspiration for at least the initial temple layouts and the skilled workmen came from Korea. As the front flap of McCallum's book states, "Few periods in Japanese history are more fascinating than the seventh century. This was the period when Buddhism experienced its initial flowering in the country...."
6. For Dogen's life, see Hee-Jin Kim's 1975 description as updated by Okumura (2010: 211-61). For an extended discussion of Soto Zen in Medieval Japan, see Bodiford (1993:21-92). Also see Heine (2018), Deal and Ruppert (2015: 87-170), Foulk (1999), Ruch (2002), and Faure (1986). It is possible that Dogen's father was alive when Dogen returned from China in 1227 (Okamura 2010: 219). Dates for the medieval period vary, with Deal and Ruppert (2015) using 950-1467.
7. There are numerous books in English on Dogen's teachings. For a small sample see Kim (1975), Heine (2006), and Okumura (2010), and the Dogen primer in this series.

8. Keizan is considered a co-founder of Soto Zen in Japan alongside Dogen because he and his disciples popularized Soto Zen and spurred its spread throughout Japan
9. Bodiford (1993:36).
10. Boxer (1951). The first missionary, the Jesuit St. Francis Xavier, arrived at Kagoshima Japan in 1549. All Christian missionaries were expelled from Japan in 1613 and in 1614 Japanese were forbidden to be Christians. Japan closed its shores to the rest of the world at this time, except for controlled trade.
11. For a review of these activities, see Williams (2005) and Covell (2005). Magico-religious therapies for illnesses were popular activities at the temples.
12. Williams (2005:3).
13. See, for example, Mohr (1994), Bodiford (1991, 2006), and Riggs (2004).
14. Williams (2005:6). This was the Edo or Tokugawa era, a long period of relative political stability ruled by a military elite (though a powerless imperial court was housed in Kyoto, the capital). In 1639, this elite enforced virtual seclusion toward the West, with most overseas ventures forbidden. During the period population grew from about 18 million at the beginning to about 30 million at the end of the period. For the era, see Williams (2009) and Totman (2014).
15. For starters see Collcutt (1986), Ketelaar (1990), Totman (1980), and Jaffe and Mohr (1998).
16. Victoria (2006), Duus (1995), Kur (1999). Japan had attempted invasion of other countries earlier, such as Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea in 1592.
17. Bodiford (2006). For the importance of the 1890 *Shushogi* (The Meaning of Practice and Verification), a layperson summary of Dogen's teachings appropriate to the times, see Heine (2003) and Part II in Wirth et al. (2017).
18. Bodiford (1992: 150).
19. Bodiford (1996), Victoria (2015), Yasuaki (1999). The Soto Zen school's Sōtō Human Rights Division is actively engaged in grappling with these issues. For an accessible (non-academic) review of Buddhism in modern Japan, see Covell (2006).
20. Hubbard and Swanson (1997), Stone (1999), Heine (2001), Heisig and Maraldo (1994).
21. Heine (2007) for a start.

22. Yamada (2011).
23. “Zen following fades in East as it grows in West,” *Buddhism Today*, accessed 08/07/2018. For present day activities of the Soto School in Japan, see Sōtō Zen International (SotoZen-Net).

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