

Article

Dōgen and the Feminine Presence: Taking a Fresh Look into His Sermons and Other Writings

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Abstract: Dōgen’s gender-egalitarian stance on women to attain awakening in their zazen practice is well known. At the same time, a nagging suspicion lingers on among some scholars that he grew increasingly misogynistic in his old age. In this present study, which focuses on Dōgen’s sermons compiled in the *Record of Eihei (Eihei kōroku)*, the *Shōbōgenzō*, and other writings related to women, we find that even after Dōgen moved to Eiheiji, his stance on women remained consistent. Not only did he readily respond to his female disciples’ requests to give special sermons in memory of their parents, but also positively saw women’s presence in the development of the Buddhist tradition. Through this study it also becomes clear that Dōgen came to embrace a more flexible view on filial piety in his later years, as he deepened his reflection on this matter—the sense of gratitude one feels for one’s parents is concomitant with nurturing one’s compassion. The aspect of compassion that sustained Dōgen’s life of teaching begins to loom large. It was his Chinese master Nyojō (Rujing) who emphasized compassion as the pillar of the zazen practice. Two sermons Dōgen delivered on the anniversary of his father’s death, moreover, have given the scholars new information concerning his parentage. The focus on the aspect of “feminine presence” in Dōgen inadvertently (or naturally?) leads to the heart of Dōgen’s own identity.

Keywords: Dōgen; Nyojō (Rujing); Myōchi; Nun Ryōnen; Nun Eshin; Nun Egi; Empress Danrin (Tachibana no Kachiko); Queen Māyā; “*Raihai Tokuzui*” (in *Shōbōgenzō*)

1. Introduction

Reading the writings and sermons of Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253) by paying close attention to his references to women—or “feminine presence,” defined less strictly and more broadly—is expected to bring out a side of his teaching that has received relatively little (scholarly) attention in Japan.¹ I should mention here that my interest in female disciples practicing under Dōgen was first piqued by P. Arai’s work, which pioneered in English the study of female practitioners of zazen.² The fact is that Dōgen’s sangha—a community of practicing Buddhists—always consisted of both lay and monastic, male and female, and he delivered his sermons both in formal as well as in the informal settings. Also good to remember is that Dōgen wrote his famous *Shōbōgenzō* essays originally for the purpose of delivering his sermons, and not to indulge in the pleasure of philosophizing. By assuming the perspective that encompasses Dōgen’s female disciples and practitioners, one gains a glimpse into not only how women practiced Buddhism in the thirteenth century Japan, but also how Dōgen, a male Buddhist teacher, guided his female disciples. Along the way it should also bring to open the question of if there were any barriers for women in their practice on account of their gender. Also included in

¹ I would like to thank the two reviewers whose comments were helpful in improving this essay.

² Arai (1999). I had the pleasure of reviewing this book for *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59.4 (November 2000) 1013–14.

this study, in relation to the requests made by his female disciples, are Dōgen's sermons delivered in memory of his parents, which in a roundabout way bring up his deepening understanding of filial piety—on how the monastics may return their gratitude to those individuals who cared for them and nurtured them. This study is a tribute to the call for a radical revalorization of Buddhist practice today—a step advocated already nearly twenty years ago.³

Here below, the use of the word “Zen” is avoided as much as possible, because Dōgen, in his anti-denominationalist and a-sectarian stance, was adamantly opposed to calling the practice centered in zazen “Zen school,” let alone calling his teaching “Sōtō Zen.”⁴ The use of the word “zen” in the lower case would retain its original meaning of Sanskrit word *dhyāna* (meaning “meditation,” of which the first sinograph of the Chinese compound word that translated *dhyāna* was pronounced “chan” in Chinese, and “zen” in Japanese), and in this way Dōgen's intent is better preserved. Be that as it may, here below, the word “zazen” 坐禪 (“seated meditation,” i.e., meditation practice) is employed whenever possible, instead of “Zen.”

Dōgen, thoroughly immersed in the spirit of Mahāyāna teaching, embraced the worldview that all beings are destined for Buddhahood—including plants and insects—the message proclaimed in the *Lotus Sutra* and other scriptures. As regards his position on the matter of gender, he was unequivocally egalitarian. At the start of his career as a zazen master, he was convinced that “male and female, the noble and the lowly—everyone can understand and embody the Buddha's teaching.”⁵ In his sermon “*Raihai tokuzui*” 礼拝得髓 [“Rendering obeisance and thereby gaining the marrow of teaching”], he famously declared:

What is so precious about being born a male? Space is space; four elements⁶ are four elements; five skandhās⁷ are five skandhās; the distinction between men and women is also thus. Both genders attain awakening. What you should pay respect is to the person who attains awakening; whether this person is male or female is beside the point.⁸

In this sermon Dōgen notes that even monks, who trained for a long time, must pay obeisance to a nun, who attains awakening, and that monks must have the humility to seek to practice under an awakened female teacher. (More on this see below.) In another sermon, “*Kattō*” [Spiritual intertwinement] (7 July 1243), Dōgen mentions a Chinese nun Sōji (Zongchi 總持, 6th century), who was recognized as one of the four dharma heirs of Bodhidharma as “having grasped his flesh.”⁹

Although Dōgen's egalitarian stance has been the source of assurance for many female practitioners of zazen down to this day,¹⁰ some academics nevertheless suspect, based on a particular reading of Dōgen's writings that he came to reverse his egalitarian stance towards female practitioners

³ Gross (1999), pp. 78–109. In this essay, she especially invoked the necessity of “study of the historical record regarding the roles and images of women in Buddhism, analysis of the key concepts of the Buddhist worldview vis-à-vis gender and gender privilege, and reconstruction of both Buddhist thought and Buddhist institutions in the light of feminist values,” p. 81.

⁴ Dōgen, *Hōkyōki*, chapter 14. See Kodera (1980), p. 123: “Dōgen asked: If the great way of all the buddhas and patriarchs cannot be confined to one narrow corner, why do we insist on calling it the Chan School?” “Rujing replied: We must not arbitrarily call the great way of the buddhas and patriarchs the Chan School. The Chan School is a false name that is lamentable indeed.” Note: the Wade-Giles transcription of Chinese words and names has been converted to the pinyin system.

See also Dōgen, “*Butsudō*” [The Buddha's Path] (1243), in Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* [Dōgen's essays and sermons], 4 vols., Mizuno Yaoko, ed., (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990). Hereafter works from these volumes are cited as SG, followed by the volume number and the pages number(s). SG 3.11–42.

⁵ “*Bendōwa*” [Negotiating the Way, An introduction to Zen practice] was composed on August 15, 1231. “*Bendōwa*,” SG 1.37.

⁶ The four “natural” elements are: earth, water, fire, and wind.

⁷ Five constitutive aspects of human existence are: (a) the physical elements, (b) the mental activity of recognition of the object, (c) conceptualizing or imaginative activities of the mind, (d) formation of the sentiments and reactions to the object, and (e) the discrimination of the objects.

⁸ Dōgen, “*Raihai Tokuzui*,” 7 March 1240, SG 2.169.

⁹ Dōgen, “*Kattō*,” SG 2.359.

¹⁰ Sugawara (2017), p. 5.

in his last decade or so of his life in favor of monastic life, especially after he moved to Eihei-ji.¹¹ In the past, even an unfounded accusation was made of Dōgen as a “cold-blooded moralist, evidenced by the fact that he had no female students.”¹² This present study offers texts that may expel any cloud of doubt from the face of the moon. The sheer fact is that female students and disciples were among the members of his original sangha, even after he moved from Fukakusa to Echizen.

A Periodization of Dōgen’s Teaching Career

It is helpful to place Dōgen’s sermons and writings in the context of his life in order to clarify the contour of his career as well as to interpret his writings as objectively as possible. During the mid-point of his life he went to China to study Chan Buddhism (1223–1227), during which time he encountered Master Nyojō (如淨, Rujing, 1162–1227) in the monastery at Tendōzan (天童山, Mt. Tiantong). From their initial encounter, a profound mutual understanding penetrated their interrelationship. Dōgen took Nyojō as his master and dedicated himself to the intensive practice of *chan* (zazen meditation) and attained his awakening already in the summer of 1225. After his return to Japan in the fall of 1227, he followed his calling to “spread the Buddha’s teaching for the sake of saving sentient beings from suffering” (*guhō kushō* 弘法救生).¹³

Dōgen’s life as a meditation master may be roughly divided into four periods:

- (1) The Ken’*nin*ji 建仁寺 period (1227–1231): Upon his return from Song China in 1227, Dōgen went back to the temple Ken’*nin*ji in Kyoto, where his deceased master Myōzen had been its abbot. Dōgen took this temple as a temporary abode for the next five years. It is here that his future dharma heir Ejō first visited him.¹⁴ It appears his fame as an outstanding zazen master was already spreading throughout Japan while he was at Ken’*nin*ji.
- (2) The An’yō’in 安養院 period (1231–1232): Dōgen appeared to be on the radar screen as a rising star who was spreading a new type of Buddhist practice, and as such came under the increasing scrutiny of Mt. Hiei, the ecclesiastic headquarters of Heian Japanese Tendai Buddhism. Under the pressure, Dōgen was forced to leave Kyoto in the early spring of 1231 and moved into An’yō’in in Fukakusa, the outskirts of Kyoto, and resided at an old temple Gokurakuji 極楽寺, which had a tie with the Kujō-Fujiwara family.
- (3) The Kōshōji 興聖寺 period (1233–1243): With the financial support of major donors, Dōgen set out to add to the already existing Buddha Hall (*butsuden*), the Dharma Hall (*hattō*) and the Meditation Hall (*sōdō*) on the compound of Gokurakuji, and established Kan’non Dōri’in 觀音導利院, which he renamed in 1236 as Kan’non Dōri’in Kōshō Hōrinji 觀音導利院 興聖宝林寺, or Kōshōji in short. For the next eleven years Dōgen energetically engaged in his teaching activities. A monk Mujū Ichien 無住一円 (1226–1312) described this temple as the first full-scale temple in Japan that was dedicated to the practice of zazen. He wrote: “Buppōbō¹⁵ introduced into Japan a Tang style large zazen meditation hall; people from many walks of life, both ordained and lay, gathered there to practice zazen. It was a remarkable sight to behold.”¹⁶
- (4) The Eihei-ji 永平寺 period (1243–1253): Again under the mounting pressure coming from Mt. Hiei, Dōgen and his *sangha* left the Kyoto area for Echizen (today’s Fukui Prefecture) in July

¹¹ Sugawara (2017), p. 7. She cites Ishikawa Rikizan’s 石川力山 essay, “*Chūsei bukkyō ni okeru ama no isō ni tsuite—tokumi shoki Sōtōshū kyōdan o chūshin to shite*” 「中世仏教における尼の位相について—特に初期曹洞宗教団を中心として」 [On the social position of nuns in medieval (Japanese) Buddhism with a special focus on the early phase of the Sōtō sect] (1992), which disseminated the interpretation that Dōgen abandoned his early egalitarian position towards women.

¹² Tokoro (1965), pp. 5–7.

¹³ Dōgen, “*Bendōwa*,” SG 1.13.

¹⁴ Ejō 懷奘, or Koun Ejō 孤雲懷奘 (1198–1280), became Dōgen’s dharma heir and the second abbot of Eihei-ji. Born of the Fujiwara, Ejō seems to have had much affinity with Dōgen in terms of his upbringing, cultural taste and cultivation, and the manners concerning the spiritual quest.

¹⁵ Buppōbō 仏法房 was Dōgen’s ‘abode’ name by which he was known when he was practicing at Mt. Hiei in his teens.

¹⁶ Mujū Ichien, *Zōtanshū* 『雑談集』 [Casual Digressions, by Mujū], (1305), quoted in Takeuchi (1992), p. 196.

1243.¹⁷ He was offered by his major patron Hatano Yoshishige 波多野義重 (d. 1258) a large plot of land to inaugurate his new monastery. Hatano was among those who personally cleared the ground for the first structure to be built there. Dōgen opened his temple Daibutsuji 大仏寺 (whose construction was completed on 1 September 1244), which he later renamed as Eihei-ji (on 15 June 1246). For the remaining years of his life, Dōgen resided at this temple and trained the members of his monastic community (with the exception of his visit made to Kamakura to instruct lay practitioners there, 3 August 1247–13 March 1248). On 5 August 1253, ailing Dōgen left for Kyoto to receive a medical treatment, but it was too late, and he died there in Kyoto on 28 August 1253, in his 54th year according to the traditional way of counting one's age.

2. Female Practitioners in the *Eihei kōroku* and Other Documents

Information concerning female disciples who practiced under Dōgen is found in the *Eihei kōroku* 永平広録 [The record of Eihei: Dōgen's sermons and other writings], posthumously edited by his disciples into ten volumes.¹⁸ Also useful are documents, such as Ejō's *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*, as well as the collection of miscellaneous writings compiled in the *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū* [Collected writings of Master Dōgen] (DZZ). On the specific topic of nuns in the Sōtō School Tajima Hakudō's monumental work, *Sōtōshū nisōshi* [A history of nuns in the Sōtō Zen sect] must be mentioned as the classical study. Concerning notable individual practitioners, male and female, who trained under Dōgen, Azuma Ryūshin's essay, "*Dōgen to sono montei*" [Dōgen and his disciples], compiled in the *Kōza Dōgen* [Dōgen Studies] provides useful information (see bibliography, below).

Here below, I will simply list several of these women mentioned in Dōgen's writings and sermons, more or less in a chronological order, and offer my English translation of Dōgen's writings as needed.

2.1. *Myōchi* 明智

Myōchi (ca. 1205?–ca. 1280) had most likely been a student of Dōgen's master Myōzen at Ken'ninji.¹⁹ Myōzen 明全 (1184–1225) had succeeded Eisai 栄西 (1141–1215) as the abbot of Ken'ninji, where Dōgen first went to practice zazen. Myōzen traveled to China, with Dōgen accompanying him, but while staying at Mt. Tiantong he died of illness (on 27 May 1225) at age 42.

When Dōgen returned to Japan and took his residence at Ken'ninji, he had with him the cremated ashes ("*shari*" 舍利 in Japanese, from Sanskrit "*śarīra*") of the late master. A young female lay practitioner asked Dōgen to have the custody of the ashes. Upon her ardent request, Dōgen entrusted them to this "Dharma Sister Chi" (Chishi 智姉) in a ceremony held on 5 October 1227. On this occasion he composed the "*Shari sōdenki*" 舍利相伝記 [On the transmission of the cremated ashes of Myōzen].²⁰ This document is written in "*kana*" (Japanese syllabary) mixed with *kanji* (or sinographs), instead of the customary "*kanbun*" (formal writing in Chinese), which amply testifies to the fact that it was written for a woman. In this document, Dōgen outlines the life activities of Myōzen, including the account of the cremation of his body at Mt. Tiantong, and the miraculous bright rays of light that emitted from the funeral pyre. He concludes this transmission document with these words:

¹⁷ The reason why Dōgen left Kyoto may have been to do with another attack carried out by the monks of Mt. Hiei. He left the responsibility of the temple management to Gijun 義準—see Takeuchi (1992), p. 223.

¹⁸ Each of these volumes of *Eihei kōroku* was edited by different disciple(s)—Sen'e 詮慧, Ejō 懷奘, Gien 義演, et al. The first seven volumes plus the first part of volume eight contain Dōgen's "*jōdō*" 上堂 (formal sermons, delivered to the sangha, 1236–1252; 531 in number); the rest of volume eight contains Dōgen's "*shōsan*" 小参 (informal sermons, 20 in number), and "*hōgo*" 法語 ("dharma talks") his essays written and given to individuals (14 in number). Volumes 9 and 10 contain Dōgen's exposition of old *kōan* ("*juko*" 頌古, 90 in number), poetic commentaries affixed to scroll drawing and so forth ("*shinsan*" 真贊—a verse accompanying the portrait of a figure, 5 in number; "*jisan*" 自贊—a verse accompanying one's own portrait, 20 in number), as well as his poetry in Chinese ("*geju*" 偈頌, 125 in number).

¹⁹ See Azuma (1979), pp. 177–79.

²⁰ Dōgen, "*Shari sōdenki*" [On the transmission of cremated ashes of Myōzen], DZZ 7, 216–18.

Dharma Sister Chi earnestly begged me for the custody of the ashes of the late master. Her dedication to Master Myōzen is firm and deep. Her ardent request is to be honored. Therefore, I entrust them to her. In this act of transmission, I wish to express my loving respect for my former teacher, and I pray that this sincere act of transmission of ashes will contribute to the dissemination of the genuine teaching [of Buddhism in Japan].²¹

This “Chishi” is identified as Myōchi 明智.²² She was the mother of Ekan, or Ekan Daishi 慧觀大姉 (1232–1316), who was the mother of Keizan Jōkin 瑩山紹瑾 (1268–1325). Myōchi raised her grandson, took the eight-year-old boy to Eiheiji, where she knew Ejō and Gikai from her days of zazen practice, asked them to admit her grandson as a novice monk, and placed him under the care of Gikai 義介, the third abbot of Eiheiji.²³ Years later in 1312 Keizan established a chapel Entsūin, on the compound of Yōkōji in Hakui on the Noto Peninsula. It was a chapel specifically dedicated to the female practitioners of zazen, as Keizan wished to pay tribute to his grandmother Myōchi in his loving memory of her and the gratitude for her. But this is another story into which we cannot enter in this study.

In December 1227—two months after the transmission of the ashes of the late master—Dōgen composed his “*Fukanzazengi*” (“Universal Promotion of the Principles of Zazen”), proclaiming to the world that zazen practice formed the heart of Buddhist practice (we shall return to this “*Fukanzazengi*” later in this study).²⁴

2.2. Nun Ryōnen 了然尼

The next several documents speak of Nun Ryōnen (d. ca. 1235?), who practiced under Dōgen during the An’yō’in period. She was apparently an advanced practitioner of zazen by the time she sought out Dōgen to further her study. Dōgen was impressed by the depth of her understanding and her commitment to the pursuit of the path. He wrote at least three sermons or “*hōgo*” 法語 for her. They are compiled in the *Eihei kōroku*, volume 8, as *Hōgo* #4, *Hōgo* #9, and *Hōgo* #12. Only *Hōgo* #12 bears the date of the composition of July 1231, but it may be assumed that these three *hōgo* date from around the same time. It is noteworthy that *Hōgo* #12 predates the composition of the “*Bendōwa*” (“Negotiating the Way,” dated 15 August 1231), which became the “Introduction” to his long series of *Shōbōgenzō*.²⁵ These *hōgo* written for Ryōnen is imbued with the same vigorous spirit of the early days of Dōgen when he embarked on his teaching career.

(a) *Hōgo* #4: On the Effability and Ineffability of the Buddha’s Teaching

There were two disciples named Ryōnen among Dōgen’s disciples—one was a monk, and the other a nun. In this *hōgo*, Dōgen refers to Ryōnen as “a female” (*nyoryū* 女流), who is a true vessel (*daijōbu* 大丈夫), which establishes without doubt that this Ryōnen is the nun Ryōnen. This *hōgo* hinges on the nature of language that serves as the “finger pointing to the moon,” which pointer dissolves once one comes in the “presence” of the moon. Dōgen warns her to leave behind this *hōgo* and take only the intent of his message to deepen her practice. Here is a rough translation of this *hōgo*:

The *Lotus Sutra* says: “The teaching of the Buddha cannot be put into words; for words perish (*jakumetsu*).”²⁶ What does it mean to “put [the teaching] into words,” and what does

²¹ DZZ 7.217.

²² Azuma (1979), p. 179.

²³ At age 13, this young novice was ordained by Ejō, the second abbot of Eiheiji, who was shortly to pass on. Keizan Jōkin became the founding abbot of Sōjiji (in 1321) and came to be addressed as “Taisō” 太祖, the Great Founder of Sōjiji, which became the headquarters of the Sōtō Zen school. See Tenshinkai (1984).

²⁴ Dōgen, “*Fukanzazengi*” [Universal promotion of zazen] (1227), in Suzuki (1980), pp. 189–216.

²⁵ The text of the “*Bendōwa*” is probably based on the meeting between Dōgen and Ejō that took place in 1229, when the latter visited Dōgen at Ken’ninji and asked him all kinds of technical questions concerning Buddhist practice and Zen practice in particular; their meeting lasted for three days. Takeuchi (1992), p. 169.

²⁶ Sakamoto and Iwamoto (1962), p. 70: 「是法不可示 言辭相寂滅」 (see chapter 2, “Skillful means.”).

it mean that “words perish”? In my view, this passage touches on the very crux of the nature of words coming into being and disappearing. Undaunted by this fact, I deliver this sermon in these words. Open your “eye” and get to the true meaning of what I am saying.

Here is the kōan: Once upon a time, Ānanda asked [Mahā-] Kāśyapa: “My Dharma Brother, besides the golden robe, what else have you received from the venerable teacher Śākyamuni?” Kāśyapa called out: “Ānanda!” to which Ānanda replied, “Yes?” Kāśyapa then said: “Take down the banner hoisted outside our place which tells the world that we are explicating the teaching of the Buddha.” Upon hearing these words, Ānanda gained “great awakening.”²⁷

I find this kōan wonderful because it not only captures the Buddha’s teaching but it also points to the reality of awakening. What is the teaching of the Buddha? It cannot be put into words or explicated to others in any way. It is because words perish. Why is it that the Buddha’s teaching cannot be put into words? Despite this impossibility, the Buddha’s teaching (*hōmon*) has been variously expressed in words. Be it “the oak tree in the garden,” or “the cloud hovering over the mountain peak”—such are expressions in which one “follows the wind and responds to the right moment”—an act which cannot be described in words.

Our venerable teachers, Śākyamuni and Bodhidharma—the one had left behind his princely palace, and the other his western kingdom—continue to preach this message down to this day. This is the teaching of “pointing to the true nature of things.” Some maintain that it can be expressed in words, while others are convinced that it cannot be, but actually, effability and ineffability both belong to their teaching. Whatever we see or touch, in the moments of moving ahead or retreating back, or deliberating before changing the course of action—nothing is left out of their teaching.

You Ryōnen, the follower of this path (了然道者), possess the seed of wisdom (*prajñā*), and have early on embraced the demanding practice of the Buddhas. Though a woman, you are endowed with the mettle of a man of great caliber.²⁸ You do not recoil from the arduous practice of cultivating the path. Thus, I composed this sermon for you on the subject of “Bodhidharma’s intention of coming from the West.”

I must append a cautionary remark. If you breathe in what these words and kōan signify, you will attain your abode in pure and cool understanding. On the other hand, if you are trapped by even half a word of an anecdote or a kōan, it will hinder your practice. Meet me, this rustic mountain monk, by discarding this piece of paper. What you must avoid by all means is to dwell on an idle speculation by being stuck in words.²⁹

²⁷ This kōan is again mentioned in Dōgen’s sermon of 1248 (and certainly, many times before then), which indicates that it was one of his favorite kōan. See Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon #252, DZZ 3.168–69. This kōan was compiled in the *Wumenguan* (*Mumonkan*) (1228), case 22. It is interesting that the *Mumonkan* was brought back to Japan in 1254 by Shinchi Kakushin 心地覺心 (1207–1297), who had received the bodhisattva precepts from Dōgen back in 1242, and who remained a devoted follower of Dōgen for life. See Azuma Ryūshin, “Dōgen to sono montei,” *Kōza Zen*, vol. 1, pp. 196–97.

²⁸ “kore nyōryū nari to iedomo, sunawachi daijōbu no shiiki ari” 「これ女流なりといえども、則ち大丈夫の志気あり。」 Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, DZZ 4.148–49. Interestingly, these were the words Kyōzan Ejaku (Yangshan Huiji) used to describe his disciple, Nun Myōshin. See Dōgen, “*Raihai tokuzui*,” SG 2.165 (see below). Miriam Levering, interpreting the connotation of the word “*daijōbu*” 大丈夫 (Ch. “*dazhangfu*”) as androcentric, argues that thereby it could be said that Song Chan masters (e.g., Daie Sōkō 大慧宗杲, Dahui Zonggao, 1089–1163) revealed their subtle discrimination against female practitioners. See Levering (1992), pp. 137–56. It is difficult to argue for this interpretation, at least in Dōgen’s case.

²⁹ Dōgen, “*Hōgo*” #4, *Eihei kōroku*, DZZ 4.146–49.

(b) Hōgo #9: Contradictory Expressions of Awakening

In the next *hōgo*, Dōgen challenges Ryōnen to work through affirmative and negative phrasing of a *kōan* by drawing upon the episode of Baso Dō'itsu (馬祖道一, Mazu Daoyi, 709–788) and his disciple, Daibai Hōjō (大梅法常, Damei Fachang, 752–839).³⁰ Here below is a summary translation of this *hōgo*:

Daibai Hōjō asked master Baso: “What is Buddha?”

Baso responded: “The mind is Buddha” (即心即仏).

Thereafter, Daibai left the master's monastery and retreated deep into a mountain.

A few decades later, a monk practicing under Enkan Sai'an (鹽官齊安 or 塩官齊安 Yanguan Qi'an, 750–842), got lost in a deep mountain and happened to wander into Daibai's abode. The monk asked Daibai: “How long have you been living here in this mountain?”

Daibai answered: “I only see green leaves of spring and colored leaves of autumn; I have not counted ‘years.’”

Monk: “How do I find my way back to the temple?”

Daibai: “Follow the mountain stream downward and you will be able to get back.”

When this monk returned to Master Enkan, he narrated to him about this mountain hermit. Enkan said: “Ah, that was the monk who practiced under Baso.”

Master Baso, having learnt the whereabouts of Daibai, dispatched a monk to interview him.

Monk: “Why did you retreat into this mountain after you practiced with Baso?”

Daibai: “The master told me that ‘the mind is Buddha.’”

Monk: “Lately, Master Baso is teaching something else.”

Daibai: “What is it?”

Monk: “‘It is no mind, no Buddha’ (非心非仏).

Daibai: “Be that as it may, for me ‘the mind is Buddha.’”

The monk returned to Baso and told him about his interview with Daibai.

Baso said: “Daibai grew considerably ripe in his practice.”

I, Dōgen, now ask you. For us who came much later to the scene, should we follow Daibai's example and retreat into a mountain? Granted there are many who uphold the teaching of “no mind, no Buddha,” but there is hardly a person who understands that “the mind is Buddha.” I ask you, Ryōnen, how would you solve this conundrum?³¹

This *kōan* seems to have been dear to Dōgen, as he composed the following poem in Chinese (#63), upon the request of someone, a practitioner of *zazen*, who wanted to have a poem by Dōgen:

“The mind is Buddha”—this is hard to practice but easy to preach.

“It is no mind, no Buddha”—this is hard to preach but easy to practice.³²

(c) Hōgo #12: Practice Like a Honeybee

The following is the *hōgo* for Ryōnen that bears the date of July 1231. Apparently, the original copy of this *hōgo* in Dōgen's own hand has been preserved.³³ Here is a rough translation of the *hōgo*:

³⁰ For the earliest mention of this *kōan* in Dōgen's “*jōdō*,” see *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon #8, DZZ 3.6–7.

³¹ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, *Hōgo* #9, DZZ 4.158–61.

³² Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, “*Geju*” #63, DZZ 4.274: 「即心即仏、行難説不難、非心非仏、説難行不難。」

³³ Tajima (1955), pp. 162–63.

The great teaching of the Buddhas of the past is subtle and eludes our conscious attempts to get at it. Thus for anyone who practices it, the path is not expected to be easy. As we look back, there was someone who had sacrificed his body and mind [as a bodhisattva], and abandoned his city-state [of which kingship he was to inherit]. Years ago, I, too, relinquished the idea of having a wife and children. I am now two and thirty. I have led a solitary life for what seems like countless eons (*kalpas*) in the mountain forest. When my body and mind grew into something that resembles a withered branch, I began to have the inkling of this teaching. Whatever little understanding I obtained, I put it to the test by holding it against mountains and seas. In my effort to express my understanding in words, I wrestled with wind and rain and turned it into words that leave my tongue and lips. Sermons sunder great void; they turn the wheel of supreme teaching. Is there anything that cannot be turned into gateway to understanding? Is there any experience that cannot be turned to illumine our understanding?

In my view, those who earnestly engage in the practice of the Buddha's teaching share a similar attitude. Here is a *kōan* to illustrate this point:

Once upon a time, a monk asked Master Hōgen Mon'eki (法眼文益, Fayān Wenyi, 885–958): "What were the old Buddhas like?"

Hōgen said: "They left no room for doubt, even to this day."

The monk asked again: "How does one sustain one's religious practice at all times?"

Hōgen said: "Make sure that with each step you take, the heel of your foot firmly touches the ground."

Hōgen also said: "Those who take up the path of practice by leaving home follow the moment and seize the occasion. It is as if, when it is cold, you are cold, and when there is heat, you are hot. In order to find out about the meaning of the Buddha-nature, be attuned to the right moment and know the right time to see your karmic connection with the teaching. If you are mindful of what is right for you and follow it, all will be fine."

Study what Hōgen said. What does it mean to "follow the moment" and "the right time"? What does it mean to "be mindful of what is right for you"? I say this to you: when you are in the world of things, do not dissect things as your mental objects. Do not dwell on the analysis of what things are; and do not busy your mind in terms of "is" and "is not." If your mind is no longer subject to any questioning, you dwell with the Buddhas of the past and practice the same path with them.

Even then, how are we to escape the plight of two mirrors set apart to reflect each other? This is why venerable Śākyamuni said: "Oh, monks [and nuns], when you enter a place where people congregate, behave like honeybees that go to the nectar without disturbing the form or fragrance of flowers." Perceptive practitioners follow this advice. Live among a myriad of things all day long, and take in only its flavor, without disturbing their form or fragrance. Why such a thing is possible that we leave intact form and fragrance of things? It is because when we come face to face with things in this universe, they actually let us be and authenticate our being. Thus, how can we disturb form or fragrance of things?

This rustic mountain monk must stop here. I stand by your most ardent determination to pursue this path, dear Ryōnen—you who far surpass me in the understanding of the teaching. I wrote this sermon only to add some color to the Buddha's path. May these words of mine leave alone undisturbed the form and fragrance of things.³⁴

³⁴ Dōgen, "Hōgo" #12 (July 1231, composed at An'yō'in at Fukakusa), in *Eihei kōroku*, DZZ 4.164–67.

(d) Two Poems in Lamentation of the Death of Ryōnen

It appears Ryōnen died within several years of her taking up the practice under Dōgen. At that time, Dōgen composed two poems of lamentation in Chinese.³⁵ They are compiled in the *Eihei kōroku*, vol. 10, in Dōgen's "Poems in Chinese" ("Geju" 偈頌), and numbered verses 26 and 27. The first verse in Chinese (#26) reads:

"There is no holiness in the vast universe"—steel-solid was your understanding of these words.

To test your awakening was like putting snowflakes on a red-hot burning stove.

I cannot refrain from asking—whither have you gone?

What sort of moon are you gazing at from beneath the deep azure waves?³⁶

Dōgen's second poem (#27) reads:

A sheet of iron melts away [in your penetrating understanding]

Whereupon have fallen six-petal snowflakes?

Without you, I see no moon in the sky above reflecting on the deep water

How am I to gaze at the moon and count its age?³⁷

(e) A Brief Observation of Dōgen's Attitude toward Ryōnen

Ryōnen must have been quite an exceptional practitioner of *zazen* so thoroughly to have impressed Dōgen. In terms of her age, it is very likely that she was many years senior to him. But seniority alone does not make the practitioner an exceptional student. Dōgen admitted that Ryōnen's understanding of the teaching was quite advanced. His attitude toward Ryōnen is one of admiration and respect, mixed with a gentle feeling of intimacy. As for the contents of Dōgen's teaching, including his choice of *kōan*, nothing is particularly chosen or tailored for her gender. Dōgen's message is gender neutral. If I am to make one observation, however, the passage in *Hōgo* #12, wherein Dōgen mentions his personal decision to let go the idea of marriage and having his own family, is quite rare in the entire corpus of his writings. Perhaps Dōgen felt comfortable in talking about to her his personal life of a man committed to religion. His two poems of lamentation are pure expressions of sadness. It appears Dōgen inherited this elegant pastime of "counting the age of the moon" and composing verses on the changing faces of the moon from his Chinese Master Nyojō, who used to take delight in such activities with his chosen disciples.³⁸

2.3. A Lady Patron *Shōgaku-ni* 正覺尼, and an Anonymous Nun

Sometime between 1232 and 1233, Dōgen began to add new buildings on the temple compound of Gokurakuji with the view of establishing a full-scale temple, after the Chinese fashion, dedicated to the practice of *zazen*. In April of 1233, the Dharma Hall (*hattō* 法堂) was completed thanks to the donation

³⁵ Tajima Hakudō estimates that Ryōnen died a few years after she came to study with Dōgen. See Tajima (1955), p. 163. Tajima refers to *Nihon tōjō rentōroku* [日本洞上聯燈録] [The transmission of lamp in the Japanese Sōtō school] (1727), compiled during the Edo period by a scholar-monk, Nanrei Shūjō 南嶺秀恕 (1675–1752), according to whom Ryōnen died some years before the sangha moved to Eihei-ji. See Tajima (1955), p. 163.

³⁶ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, DZZ 4.262–63.

³⁷ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, DZZ 4.262–63. These two poems bear the foreword: "lamenting the death of Nenshi (然子)." Kagamishima Genryū, the editor of this particular DZZ volume, gives the identity of this "Ryōnen" 了然 as "unknown," but Tajima Hakudō identifies it as Nun Ryōnen, based on the record in the *Nihon tōjō rentōroku*. See Tajima (1955), p. 163.

³⁸ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, "Geju" (##81–86), DZZ 4.282–85.

of a certain lady patron Shōgaku-ni. This was the beginning of Kan'on Dōri'in, which eventually grew into the temple, Kōshōji. As to the identity of this grand patron Shōgaku-ni ("ni" denotes that this lady became a nun), scholarly investigations continue to this day, with no conclusive evidence to support any one particular conjecture. At least it is certain that there was a high-ranking lady of a considerable financial means among Dōgen's supporters.³⁹

Ejō Koun's joining the sangha in 1234 seems to have energized Dōgen to proceed in his teaching activities at the newly inaugurated Kōshōji. Ejō became Dōgen's dharma heir (*hassu* 法嗣) the following year and was appointed to the position of meditation master (*shuso* 首座) on the last day of December 1235. Ejō kept a detailed record of Dōgen's words of advice that were freely given to his disciples (between the time period of 1235 and 1237, and possibly into 1238), and compiled them into *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki* [Record of Master Dōgen's teaching]. These words reveal Dōgen as an engaging master, who readily responded to all kinds of concerns brought to him by his disciples. The following is a question asked by a certain nun, who was practicing under Dōgen, and his response to her:

A certain nun asked the Master: "Even high-ranking ladies (*nyōbō* 女房) these days study and practice Buddhism (*buppō* 佛法), while remaining at home and without renouncing the world. In contrast, I have taken the tonsure and become a nun (*bikuni* 比丘尼), and therefore I wonder if I could occasionally relax my practice and my conduct. What is your view on this matter?"

The Master replied: "That is not so. Those women who remain at home and pursue their Buddhist practice may gain awakening accordingly. But if a woman, who takes up the vow to renounce the world, does not have the resolution to devote herself to the practice, how can she attain awakening?"

"The reason is that it is not the Buddhist practice that chooses the person who will attain awakening, but rather it is the person who chooses whether or not to embrace the Buddhist path. The determination and motivation of those who take up religious life (*shukke* 出家) should be different from those who remain at home (*zaike* 在家). Among those who remain at home, should there be a person who aspires to renounce the world, then, let her leave home. On the other hand, if the one who renounced the world still retains the mental attitude of someone who practices at home, then, such a person is committing double error. The very resolution to renounce the world should be something special.

"It is said, 'it is not hard to practice any path, but it is hard to practice it well.' I have no doubt that those who renounce the world and devote themselves to Buddhist practice are sincere in their intention, but there are only a few who truly embrace the practice.

"Life and death should be of the utmost concern for those who practice religion. Life flees away with the speed of light. Do not relax your practice. If you renounce this world, you must do so wholeheartedly with your entire being. Such a distinction as the one who renounces the world and the one who remains at home is ultimately provisional."⁴⁰

2.4. Dōgen's Sermon Concerning Female Practitioners, "Raihai Tokuzui"

Dōgen delivered the following sermon on 7 March 1240—that is, during the Kōshōji period—specifically addressing the equal ability of women in attaining awakening.⁴¹ Although

³⁹ Tajima (1955), pp. 171–74. Arai gives the name of the wife of the third Kamakura Shōgun Sanetomo as the nun Shōgaku, but there is no definitive consensus among the Dōgen scholars on this point; see Arai (1999), p. 41.

⁴⁰ Ejō, *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki* 4.2, edited by Mizuno Yaoko, in Nishio et al. (1965), pp. 381–82. The text based on the Chōenji 長門寺本 edition is identified as book 4, section 2; according to the older Menzan 面山本 edition, it is book 3, Section 2. For an existent English translation see Masunaga (1971), pp. 49–50. The present translation is mine.

⁴¹ He delivered this sermon on 7 March 1240; "Raihai tokuzui," see SG 2.159–83.

the sermon deals with the topic of women practicing zazen, it was aimed at both his female and male members of the sangha. It must have had a different impact on them depending on their gender: women practitioners received reaffirmation and encouragement, while male members might have reflected on their attitude towards their female co-practitioners. Thanks to the increasing scholarly interest in the feminist issues in Buddhism, this sermon is quite regularly quoted these days elsewhere. Therefore, I will only quote several passages from this sermon at this time.⁴² Besides, its sheer length makes it impossible for me to attempt a translation in full for this study.

In this sermon Dōgen mentions two enlightened legendary Chinese nuns—Massan Ryōnen and Myōshin—who attained profound awakening.⁴³ Massan Ryōnen (末山了然, Moshan Liaoran, d.u.) was the dharma heir of Master Kōan Daigu (高安大愚, Gao'an Dayu, d.u.), and for some time the teacher of Kankei Shikan (灌溪志閑, Guanxi Zhixian, d. 895), who, after leaving Rinzai Gigen (臨濟義玄, Linji Yixuan, d. 866)'s temple, went to study with her as he recognized her extraordinary understanding. Later, by then an eminent master himself, Shikan proudly acknowledged that "Rinzai was his dharma father, while Massan his dharma mother."⁴⁴

Myōshin (妙信, Miaoxin, d.u.) was a disciple of Kyōzan Ejaku (仰山慧寂, Yangshan Huiji, 807–883), and was appointed to the head of the temple office that took care of economic and business matters as well as public relations—*kaiinju* 廨院主. The story goes that before appointing her to the position of *kaiinju*, Kyōzan had made an inquiry among the former officers and senior monks, who all recommended Myōshin to this position. Kyōzan warmly described her as "although a woman, she has the mettle of the true vessel."⁴⁵ Dōgen refers to an anecdote in which seventeen monks, who were on their way to visit Master Kyōzan to train under him, stayed at the guest dormitory, which was overseen by Myōshin. They recognized her as a person of genuine awakening, got some insight into their practice from their interview with her, took her as their teacher, and went home without seeing Master Kyōzan.⁴⁶

Dōgen also gives the account of the Song custom of appointing nuns who attain awakening to the position of abbess in a nunnery, whenever there is vacancy:

Nuns pursue their zazen practice, and once they attain awakening, the imperial court issues a decree to appoint her to a position of abbess in a nunnery. At that time, the new abbess gives her "*jōdō*" (official sermon by ascending the dharma hall platform) at the master's temple where she has been practicing, at which ceremony her master as well as all the fellow monks are present and listen to her, standing in the courtyard. After that, those monks engage in the exchange of questions and answers with her.⁴⁷

In another sermon, also entitled "*Raihai tokuzui*," Dōgen critically talks about the misogynistic monastic practices carried out in Japan.⁴⁸ It is evident that witnessing the Chinese practice gave him the intercultural perspective, with which he was able to relativize Japanese customs and conventions and ask critical questions of their validity. For instance, he mentions that Japanese monks are taught to avoid an eye contact with women, which in his view is a flagrant violation of the bodhisattva vow:

⁴² The following is appearing in my essay, "Japanese Buddhism and Women: The Lotus, Amida, and Awakening," Yusa (2018b). The present English translation is an improvement on the older version.

⁴³ Dōgen, "*Raihai tokuzui*," SG 2.164–67.

⁴⁴ Dōgen, "*Raihai tokuzui*," SG 2.163–65.

⁴⁵ See above, Dōgen's *Hōgo* #4, give to Nun Ryōnen, and note 28, above.

⁴⁶ Dōgen, "*Raihai tokuzui*," SG 2.165–67.

⁴⁷ Dōgen, "*Raihai tokuzui*," SG 2.168–69.

⁴⁸ Sugawara Ikuko notes that Dōgen himself deleted this sermon from the final version of *Shōbōgenzō*, lest it might provoke unnecessary anti-Dōgen sentiments among the ecclesiastic establishment and the court officials. Sugawara (2017), p. 7. This second "*Raihai tokuzui*" was delivered on October 30 (October was repeated twice in 1240; it is during the repeated month of October, 1240). This once deleted version is compiled back in the *Shōbōgenzō*, following the other earlier version of "*Raihai tokuzui*," SG 2. 171–83.

What faults do women have? What virtues do men possess? . . . Say, you vow not to look at women, and yet you chant: “Sentient beings are numerous, I vow to save them all.” Are you not perchance excluding women from the category of “sentient beings”? If so, you are not a bodhisattva, nor are you exercising compassion (*butsujihi* 仏慈悲). The notion of avoiding to look at women is nothing but the words of drunken madness uttered by *śrāvakas* (*shōmon* 声聞).⁴⁹

Dōgen likewise criticized the Japanese Buddhist practice of demarcating certain hills and mountains as the “sacred realm of asceticism” (*kekkaï* 結界), into which women were forbidden to enter.⁵⁰ Concerning this custom, he noted:

There is a laughable practice unique to Japan. That is, they demarcate a certain area (*kekkaï*) and call it the sacred realm or the hall of religious practice (*dōjō* 道場), into which nuns and women are forbidden to enter. This custom has been practiced for centuries now, without anyone questioning its validity.⁵¹

And further:

Moreover, those who dwell within the “sacred realm” actually freely break the ten precepts and commit weighty sins. They are compounding their sins. Such a devilish realm (*makai* 魔界) ought to be abolished.⁵²

This critical spirit Dōgen exhibited did not have any direct impact on the shape of Japanese Buddhist practice of his time, but it is to be noted that the new spirit, exhibited by Dōgen, was beginning to take root in Japan, as Chinese Chan practice was introduced to Japan with full force around the time of Dōgen’s passing. Women were to find in the new form of Buddhist practice a welcoming acceptance that enabled them to take up *zazen* meditation and attain the understanding of the teaching. This, again, is another story that shall be told elsewhere.

2.5. A Sermon Delivered for Nun Eshin 比丘尼惠信

The next is a sermon Dōgen gave in response to the request made by Nun Eshin to commemorate the anniversary of the death of her father. Nun Eshin had most likely been a member of the practitioners affiliated with the disbanded Nihon Daruma Sect, before she joined Dōgen’s sangha together with her co-practitioners in around 1240.⁵³ This sermon by Dōgen is dated from the spring of 1246. On June 15 of that year, he renamed the temple Daibutsuji as Eiheiji, making this as one of the last sermons he delivered at Daibutsuji:

Once you understand one principle, you understand all principles. Once you know heaven, earth, and man, you know all the Buddhas. Therefore it is said: ‘To have the sense of gratitude (*on* 恩) for one’s parents is to return their love.’

When a monk Zengen Chūkō (漸源仲興, Jianyuan Zhongxing, d.u.) accompanied his master Dōgo Enchi (道吾円智, Daowu Yuanzhi, 769–835) and went to a house to make a condolence call, Zengen, touching his hand on the coffin, asked the master: “Alive or dead?” Dōgo

⁴⁹ Dōgen, “*Raihai tokuzui*,” SG 2.175.

⁵⁰ This practice traces its root in the ancient native Shinto worldview.

⁵¹ Dōgen, “*Raihai tokuzui*,” SG 2.177.

⁵² Dōgen, “*Raihai tokuzui*,” SG 2.181.

⁵³ Tajima (1955), pp. 167–68. Tajima conjectures that her dharma name shares in common the sinographs “e” —慧 or 惠— which was given to a group of practitioners who formed a sub-sect within the former Nihon Daruma Sect. For instance, Etatsu 慧達, who took the tonsure and became a monk under Dōgen, was a member of this group; in celebration of this occasion Dōgen composed his *hōgo*, “*Hokke ten hokke*” [“The lotus flower turning upon itself”] (1241) and gave it to Etatsu; SG 4.429–49.

responded: “Neither alive nor dead.” Zengen further pressed on: “Why is it that you don’t say alive or dead?” Dōgo only said: “I won’t say, I won’t say.”⁵⁴

Commented on this kōan, Dōgen said: to talk about whether one is alive or dead only shows that the questioner is ignorant of the Buddhas of the past, present, and future. About the reality of being alive or dead, animals know it better. “To say neither alive nor dead” paints a picture of an old steel-like ox laying down its belly on the sand because of its age. “Why don’t you speak?” means the tip of the tongue is long, while the width of the mouth is narrow. “I won’t say, I won’t say” is the experience of a tiger, the king of the beasts, when it had its first cub.⁵⁵

2.6. A Sermon Delivered for Nun Egi 比丘尼懷義

The following is a sermon Dōgen delivered sometime after 1 September and before 10 December of 1250, for Nun Egi, on the day of the anniversary of her deceased mother. Egi was one of the first nuns who joined Dōgen’s sangha, at the time when Ejō and Eshō 懷照 did in 1234, after the passing of their Master Kakuan 覺晏, who had led the former members of the disbanded Nihon Daruma Sect. Here is Dōgen’s sermon:

There is no fixed point on which life depends, nor from which it emerges. It is as if one dons a pair of *hakama*-trousers [or “baggy trousers” that hangs on one’s hips]. By this, I do not mean to belittle the sanctity of life. I simply say: “all things return to one source.”⁵⁶ Talking about death, there is no fixed point from which it arises. It is as if one takes off the *hakama*-trousers. They drop down anywhere where one takes them off. Therefore I ask, where does this “one source” find its repose? Life and death pass so quickly.

After a pause, Dōgen said: Life and death do not obstruct each other. Just as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ deeds are ultimately empty. They have no eternal abode.⁵⁷

Egi seems to have become a respected and indispensable member of Dōgen’s sangha at Eiheiji. She was known as the “venerable dharma aunt Egi” (or “*Egi shiko*” 懷義師姑) to Gikai, who was to assume the third abbacy of Eiheiji after Ejō. On 28 July 1253, when ailing Dōgen gave his last administrative instructions to Gikai concerning how to run the temple while he was to be away in Kyoto, Egi, too, from discreetly separated by a screen, was present at his bedside and received these instructions.⁵⁸

2.7. Two Legendary Female Figures

The next two sermons do not directly concern a specific female disciple of Dōgen but are noteworthy in that he refers to the legendary women who have played a key role in the formation of Buddhist tradition. The first sermon mentions Empress Danrin, who had invited a Chinese Chan

⁵⁴ Zengen Chūkō (d.u.) was a dharma heir of Dōgo Enchi (d.u.). The reality of being alive or being dead is not something one can talk about “objectively,” but it belongs to the realm of experience and feeling. Thus, the master kept his mouth shut on this point, while the disciple wanted a yes-no answer.

⁵⁵ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon #161, DZZ 3.104–5. The kōan based on which Dōgen gave his sermon is compiled in *The Blue Cliff Record*, Case 55.

⁵⁶ Here, Dōgen is referring to the kōan, “Jōshū’s all things return to the one,” which is compiled in *The Blue Cliff Record*, Case 45. Dōgen deeply respected Jōshū, and took the name of Kan’non’in (觀音院, Guanyinyuan), when he first established Kōshōji in Kyoto. Kan’non’in was where Jōshū Jūshin (趙州從諗, Zhaozhou Congshen, 778–897) settled at age 80 and taught until his death. In his warm respect for Jōshū, Dōgen originally named his first temple Kōshōji as Kan’non Dōri’in.

⁵⁷ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon #391, DZZ 3.262–64.

⁵⁸ Gikai, “*Goyuigon kiroku*,” DZZ 7.188–89. Also see Tajima (1955), p. 166. Tajima conjectures that Egi personally took care of Dōgen whose illness forced him to stay in bed, starting in October 1252. The use of screen to hide one’s direct appearance, a common practice among elegant court ladies of the bygone Heian period (which ended in 1192), may account for this practice described here.

master to come to Japan to introduce the practice of zazen. The second sermon talks about the Buddha's birthmother Māyā. These sermons, dating from his last years of life (1249 and 1252, respectively), seem to indicate that Dōgen came to acknowledge the "female presence" in the Buddhist tradition, more freely in the last years of his life.

(a) Empress Danrin 檀林皇后

In this sermon of December 1249, Dōgen speaks about the tradition of "jōdō" 上堂 (the master giving formal sermons by ascending the dharma hall platform) to have begun with himself in Japan. In this context, he attributes the first introduction of zazen meditation practice to Japan from China to the initiative of Empress Danrin (that is, Tachibana no Kachiko 橘嘉智子, 786–850), a consort of Emperor Saga 嵯峨 (reigned 809–823) and the mother of Emperor Ninmyō 仁明 (reigned 833–850). Moved by the Empress's earnest solicitation, Master Enkan Sai'an 塩官齊安 (whose name was mentioned in "Hōgo #9" to Ryōnen, above) recommended his dharma heir Gikū 義空 to go to Japan to teach the path of meditation (*chan*) practice to the Japanese people. The date of Gikū's arrival in Japan is conjectured to be either in 834 or 847.⁵⁹ The Empress had built the temple Danrinji 檀林寺 on the ground where Tenryūji stands today, and installed Gikū as its founding abbot. Consequently she came to be known by the name of this temple, Danrin.⁶⁰

Dōgen's sermon reads as follows:

I am the first one to initiate the practice of "jōdō" in Japan. During the reign of Emperor Saga, in response to the request made by Empress Tachibana (the wife of Emperor Saga and the mother of Emperor Ninmyō), the National Teacher Enkan Sai'an of the Tang dispatched his dharma heir Gikū to Japan.⁶¹ Empress Danrin offered him the western compound of Tōji in Kyoto for him to reside, and she herself practiced zazen morning and evening. She treated him with utmost respect and unprecedented hospitality. Gikū, however, did not give a formal sermon or a private audience . . .

The practice of "dropping the body and the mind" (i.e., zazen) does not fall within the realm of the study of phenomena or consciousness. It does not even talk about awakening or delusion. After all, what are "things"? What is "Buddha"?

After a paused, Dōgen said: If you wish to get to know the guest from the south of Yangzi River, listen to the songs of partridges that inhabit that part of the world.⁶²

According to the record of eminent Buddhist masters in Japan (*Honchō kōsōden*, 1702), Gikū soon left Japan and returned to China, judging as Empress Danrin being the only one who understood the teaching, that the time was premature to introduce to the Japanese the teaching of *chan*—attaining awakening *via* zazen practice. There is a fascinating side story to this: Empress Danrin had actually first consulted the eminent monk Kūkai 空海 (774–835) and asked to hear him speak about the esoteric practice of Buddhism that he had brought back from China. Upon her inquiry, Kūkai suggested that there was a new style of practice that was gaining popularity in Tang China, with which he himself was unfamiliar but it was called "Busshinshū" 仏心宗 (the practice of the Buddha-mind), and that it was a very excellent way to practice Buddhism. It was based on this recommendation by Kūkai that Empress Danrin sent her messenger Egaku to China to contact Master Enkan Sai'an.⁶³

⁵⁹ Tanaka (2012) is cited as the source of the later date. The earlier date is based on the *Honchō kōsōden*. For a brief biography of Gikū see *Honchō kōsōden* (1702), pp. 174–76.

⁶⁰ On Gikū and Empress Danrin see Ibuki (2001), p. 184.

⁶¹ The text of *Eihei kōroku* has the name "Egen 惠元" where it should have been "Gikū." It may have been the case of mistake on the part of the scribe or the result of confounding the name of the messenger, Egaku 慧尊, who carried the epistle from the Empress to the National Teacher Enkan Sai'an, and Gikū.

⁶² Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon # 358, DZZ 3.230.

⁶³ See *Honchō kōsōden*, 174. It appears the messenger Egaku returned to China at least twice, as his first visit did not bear concrete fruit.

(b) Māyā, the “Holy Mother” (*shōmo* 聖母)

It appears Dōgen inherited the custom of celebrating the day of the birth of Śākyamuni Buddha from Wanshi Shōgaku (宏智正覺, Hongzhi Zhengjue, 1091–1157),⁶⁴ whom Nyojō greatly respected. The following sermon delivered on 8 April 1252, stands out, for therein Dōgen narrates in considerable detail the story of Queen Māyā and the birth of the baby Bodhisattva (i.e., Śākyamuni Buddha). The sermon reads:

A birth into *Tosotsu* (*Tushita*) Heaven, a conception in a mother’s womb, the delivery, leaving the secular world to pursue a religious path, defeating the temptation of Māra (the Lord of Senses), awakening under the Bodhi tree, turning the wheel of teaching, and going into *parinirvāna*—these are the eight phases all Buddhas undergo, who make their appearance in this world.

When Queen Māyā reached the gardens of Lumbinī, the Bodhisattva was delivered and made his appearance in the world.⁶⁵ God Indra offered the baby to the mother, carefully wrapped it up in a heavenly cloth, while every human and divine being present there adored the face of the newborn baby. At that very moment a jewel-like lotus flower blossomed and received the feet of the Bodhisattva, while flower petals were showering down on him from the sky, scattered by the heavenly gods. The baby took seven steps into four cardinal directions, and looked around, without blinking his eyes. When his mouth opened, these words came out: “I am the most splendid one, I am the most splendid one. I am born into this world. My former *karmas* are all extinguished. This is the last incarnation I am going to assume in this body. I am to become a Buddha.”

Two ponds welled up from the surface of the earth to offer homage to the holy mother (*shōmo*), while two streams of water flowed from the sky and bathe the Bodhisattva. It was a splendid sight with jeweled cloths everywhere and a golden canopy protecting the bather. This was the offering of heavenly gods. The time was ripe for the Buddha to be born. Twenty thousand heavenly maidens surrounded Māyā to support her. Five hundred gods sang the praise of the baby Bodhisattva and waited upon him. Three thousand trees and plants of all sizes bore beautiful flowers. All sentient beings present there received the blessings of the light. Those who were suffering from pains were all relieved of their afflictions, and those who were already enjoying delight increased in the degree of their pleasure. How could one possibly exhaust these auspicious signs by enumerating them all?

Today, the gift of this joyous occasion is all made new again. How can it be? Who would even dare to engage in a futile speculation as to why the Buddha made his appearance in this world?

After a pause, Dōgen said: “Forget all the devices I have employed in my teaching, and be diligent in your practice until you forget your straw sandals. There is no need for an empty husk full of *avidhyā* to compete to be equal with the Buddha, for each of you is the king of the world from this day on.”⁶⁶

In about six months, Dōgen’s physical condition deteriorated quickly and he was unable to deliver his sermons any longer. Thus, this was his last sermon to celebrate the birth of the Buddha, and in that light it seems remarkable that Dōgen paid such tribute to Queen Māyā by describing her “*shōmo*,” the holy mother.

⁶⁴ Dōgen regularly celebrated the Buddha’s birthday—see his sermons of 1247 (#237) and 1249 (#320) in *Eihei kōroku*, but he made no elaborate mention of Queen Māyā in these earlier sermons.

⁶⁵ According to the tradition, the Buddha was born from the right side of the mother’s body, and not from her womb, as the baby did not want to cause pain to his mother.

⁶⁶ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon #495, DZZ 4:78–81.

2.8. Sermons in Memory of His Parents

That Dōgen readily responded to the requests of Nuns Eshin and Egi and delivered sermons in memory of their parents seems important, as such an engagement may have occasioned him to reflect on the meaning of remembering his own parents. This brings me to the final section of this present study, which touches on Dōgen's understanding of filial piety—how a monastic may remember and return the love of one's mother and father. It appears that towards the end of his life, Dōgen came to adjust his view on "filial piety," and considered it perfectly acceptable even for the monastics.⁶⁷

(a) Early Dōgen on Filial Piety

Dōgen's earlier stance on filial piety is found in Ejō's *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*, where Dōgen, in his mid-thirties, expressed his view as follows:

Filial piety is most important, but it is practiced differently by those who stay at home and by those who renounce the world and take up the religious path. . . . Monks and nuns sever their ties with the secular world and live in the religious realm (*mui* 無為). Thus their obligations are not limited to their parents alone, but to all beings, and therefore they must fill the world with good deeds. . . . To understand the sense of gratitude for one's parents in this light is to know profound gratitude.⁶⁸

Dōgen further added his observation that in China *chan* masters deliver memorial services for their dharma teachers, but not for their parents. Dōgen thus reasoned that the mind of those who leave home should be concerned with the wellbeing of all beings, by going beyond their personal sense of gratitude for their parents.⁶⁹ In another passage of the *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*, we learn about a male practitioner who was in the quandary as to whether or not to leave his mother to take up the religious path, because he was the only son and his mother's wellbeing depended on him. Fully acknowledging his inner struggle as a "difficult question," Dōgen nevertheless encourages him to follow his deepest spiritual aspiration.⁷⁰

(b) Later Dōgen on Filial Piety

In contrast to this earlier view, in his later years Dōgen freely spoke about his gratitude for his parents in his sermons. The following is his sermon of 2 September 1252, marking the 27th anniversary of the death of his father. This sermon being numbered #524 (out of 531) in the *Eihei kōroku*, one can reasonably assume that it expresses Dōgen's mature and final stance on the question of filial piety. Here are his words:

In gratitude for my father and mother, I deliver this sermon on the occasion of celebrating the anniversary of the death of my father, the Great Councilor Minamoto (*Minamoto ashō*). To return the love of one's parents is a time-honored practice even back in the days of Śākyamuni. How does one come to know one's gratitude for one's parents and how can one return it? On this point, it may be suggested that those who leave home and take up the religious life (*mui*) practice a different set of obligations.

But how can the light of the bright days be obscured by wintery frost and dew? Nine generations of my ancestors are now in heaven, and I am grateful for the love of my parents. I refer to the following kōan to illustrate how those who engage in the life of zazen practice may practice filial piety:

⁶⁷ Kagamishima (1988), DZZ 4.314–15.

⁶⁸ Masunaga (1971), pp. 41–42. The translation is slightly altered.

⁶⁹ Mizuno, *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki*, 3.16 (Menzan edition 2.19).

⁷⁰ Mizuno, *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki* 4.10 (Menzan edition 3.14).

When Master Yakusan Igen (薬山惟儼, Yaoshan Weiyan, 745–828) came out of his zazen, a monk asked him. “Assuming the immovable posture, what were you *thinking* about (*shiryō* 思量)?”

The master said: “About *no-thinking* (*fushiryō* 不思量).”

The monk asked again: “How does one think about no-thinking?”

The master said: “By what enables thinking (*hishiryō* 非思量).”⁷¹

Today, I honor my parents by dedicating all the merits I have accrued through my zazen practice over the years.

After a pause, Dōgen said: In the rocklike steady zazen meditation, Ri is Chō, and Chō is Ri.⁷² We may mean “black” but actually say “yellow.” Who can describe what passes atop the meditation cushion and in the meditation hall? Water, boiling over red-hot charcoal, is still pure and fresh.⁷³

It is remarkable that this exchange between Yakusan and the monk had remained for Dōgen the guiding principle of zazen-based practice throughout his life from the very beginning of his teaching career. Regarding Dōgen’s reflection on “thinking,” “no-thinking” and “what enables thinking,” we need only to refer to his “Universal Promotion of the Practice of Zazen,” or “*Fukanzazengi*” (1227), in which he explained in detail the ABC of zazen and he quoted these words of Yakusan:

For the practice of zazen, a quiet room is suitable . . . Sit either in the full-lotus or half-lotus posture. . . . Then place your right hand on your left leg and your left palm facing upwards on your right palm, thumb-tips touching. Sit upright in correct bodily posture. . . . you should breathe gently through your nose. Once you have adjusted yourself into this posture, take a deep breath, inhale, exhale, rock your body to the right and left, and *settle into a steady, unmoving sitting position. Think of no-thinking. How do you think of no-thinking? By that which enables thinking and no-thinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen.*⁷⁴

In his final year—as in less than a year he was to pass—Dōgen thus dedicated all the merits he had accrued in his zazen practice to the loving memory of his parents. Indeed, Dōgen’s stance on filial piety seems to have undergone a subtle change, or “maturation.” His ultimate understanding on filial piety suggests that a particular expression of one’s sense of obligation has a universal dimension, as after all the one who practices zazen drops off his or her mind and the body, in which state the “particular” is “affirmed” by all things in the universe. This cosmic awareness no doubt was in part the reason why Dōgen readily responded to his female disciples’ requests to give special sermons to remember their deceased parents. Moreover, these occasions may have further led him to reminisce about his own parents and speak about the sense of gratitude he felt for them.

Actually, two years prior to this sermon of 1252, Dōgen had delivered another sermon in memory of his father. It reads:

My staff [which I use for teaching] is made from a certain plum tree, which took root in the Ten’ryaku era, during the reign of Emperor Murakami.⁷⁵ Five petals of plum blossoms are

⁷¹ On Dōgen’s extensive treatment of this kōan by Yakusan, see Dōgen, “*Zazenshin*,” SG 1.226–52. For a detailed reflection on the three key terms, “*shiryō*,” “*fushiryō*,” and “*hishiryō*,” see Yusa (2018a).

⁷² Nishitani Keiji was fond of using “Peter” and “Paul” to explain the point to the English reader. In the realm of utter freedom, where one’s ego is transcended, there is no ordinary barrier that separates two individuals. In the original, it is “Li” and “Zhang”—two common Chinese family names.

⁷³ *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon #524, DZZ 4.104–5.

⁷⁴ Waddell and Masao (2002), pp. 3–4. The translation of the last line is slightly altered to correspond to the kōan mentioned in Dōgen’s sermon. Emphasis added.

⁷⁵ It was during the Ten’ryaku era (947–957), that the lineage of Murakami Genji got started with the imperial prince Morofusa, a grandson of Emperor Murakami (reigned 946–965).

fragrant and do not show any sign of aging. Its root, bark, and fruit—all reveal an aspect of timelessness.⁷⁶

He also gave two sermons in memory of his mother, one in December of 1250 (#409), and the other possibly in 1251 (#478).⁷⁷ The sermon #409 resonates with the sermon #363 we just quoted above, as both mention "plum tree," with which Dōgen always felt a special affinity. It reads:

There is a plum tree in a certain village. To see it is like seeing a warm flame of a stove in the snow-covered landscape. A precious jewel is sewn into the lining of my straw sandals. Who would hold grudges against the moon in the sky? By facing it, one reaches it somehow.

How is this sangha of Eiheiji faring these days? This rustic monk has the words of gratitude on this day. My staff does its job of teaching by conveying my points to you so effortlessly.⁷⁸

As we contrast Dōgen's earlier and later views on filial piety, there is very little doubt that he deepened his reflection on this matter and came to embrace the attitude that one's sense of filial obligation was concomitant with the practice of cultivating one's compassion for all things and all beings in the universe.

2.9. Dōgen's Parentage

The following is a digression, but an important one. Dōgen's sermons dedicated to his parents gave an important clue to scholars to reexamine the traditional account of his parentage. In the last three decades, Dōgen scholars came to consider that Dōgen's father was most likely Koga (or Minamoto no) Michitomo 久我通具 or 源通具 (1171–1227), also known as Lord Horikawa 堀川, debunking the traditional conjecture that Koga Michichika 通親 (1149–1202, who actually was Michitomo's father) as his birthfather.

Michitomo was an accomplished poet apart from being a courtier-statesman, and took part in the compilation of the imperially commissioned poetry collection, *Shinkokinwakashū* [The new "Kokin" poetry collection] (1205). Therein in this collection we find over ten poems ("waka") by Michitomo, the first one being about plum blossoms and the moon. In reading this poem, one cannot help but wonder if the young Dōgen, five or six years old then, may have repeatedly heard this poem or others as he was growing up. The poem reads:

Ume no hana

ta ga sode fureshi

nioi zo to

Haru ya mukashi no

tsuki ni towaba ya.

"O! plum blossoms,

Whose sleeves have touched you?

You smell so fragrantly.

I shall ask the moon of the bygone days,

Still shining, in the spring sky."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, #363 (1250), DZZ 3.232–33.

⁷⁷ There seems to be some misdating concerning these two sermons. See editor's note on *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon #478, DZZ 4.60.

⁷⁸ Dōgen, *Eihei kōroku*, Sermon #409, DZZ 3.276–77. <the note here is rephrased>

⁷⁹ Sasaki (1959), p. 31 (poem #46).

The Koga family belongs to the Minamoto 源 (or “Genji”) line that traces its origin to Emperor Murakami’s grandson—the lineage of so-called “Murakami Genji” 村上源氏. Dōgen’s reference to his father as “*ashō*” 垂相 of the Minamoto is an important clue, as “*ashō*” was the Chinese reference to the court rank of “*dainagon*” 大納言, “Great Councilor,” which Michitomo held at the time of his death. Dōgen did not follow the established custom of referring to his deceased father as “*senkō*” 先考, and this had caused the problem that perhaps he was referring to the “foster father” rather than the “birthfather” by the term “*ikufu*” 育父 (“father who raised him”), but learned scholars of the classical Chinese language corroborate that “*ikufu*” could be used to refer to one’s own deceased father.⁸⁰ In view of the fact that Dōgen was born out of wedlock (or left home to become a monk in his young age), it could be conjectured that he preferred to call his dead father “*ikufu*,” out of respect for him. It was after all his father, who allowed him to become a monk, overriding the hopes of his relatives that the boy may pursue a career of elite courtier-statesmanship. Who then was Dōgen’s birthmother? Interesting speculations can be had on this question, but I refrain from going into this point at this time.

3. Conclusions

It is perhaps not surprising that by the end of this study, the aspect of compassion begins to loom as having sustained Dōgen’s life of teaching and his practice of zazen. I am not arguing here that compassion is associated with the “feminine” quality, but rather, the focus on women seems to bring up this dimension of Dōgen more clearly as the investigation unfolded. Compassion is gender-neutral, just as awakening is. In fact, it was Master Nyojō (Rujing) who described “*dabei*” or “*daihi*” 大悲 as the foundation of the meditation practice and of the bodhisattva path. Dōgen noted in his *Hōkyōki* these words of Master Nyojō:

The Master said: “Meditation practiced by the buddhas and patriarchs takes great compassion the most essential, whereby they save all sentient beings . . . In their meditation practice, the buddhas and patriarchs wish to carry on their shoulders all sentient beings, while they deepen and enlarge their awareness. Sentient beings are neither forgotten nor abandoned. Their compassionate thought is always extended even to insects. In their vow to save all sentient beings, they *transfer their every merit* to the salvation of all sentient beings . . . They cultivate their merits and attain a flexible mind (*nyūnanshin* 柔軟心).”

Dōgen asked: “What is this flexibility of mind?”

The Master replied: “The will of the buddhas and patriarchs to drop the body and the mind leads to the attainment of this flexible mind.”⁸¹

Allow me to mention in this context that Nishida Kitarō, who sat zazen for a decade before he seriously grappled with philosophical issues, especially commented on this word “*nyūnanshin*” in his *Nihon bunka no mondai* [Problem of Japanese Culture] (1940). He wrote: “When Master Dōgen returned from China, in response to a question asked by someone, ‘What did you learn in China,’ he said ‘I have nothing particular to report, but I did return to Japan with a ‘flexible mind.’”⁸² For Nishida, Dōgen’s “flexible mind” corresponds to the attitude of “one thinks becoming a thing, and one acts becoming a thing” (*mono to natte kangae, mono to natte okonau*), which stands for the essential working together of action and intuition (or knowledge), and hence, a “blind action” would indeed not be an action in the proper sense of the word.

⁸⁰ Kagamishima (1988), DZZ 4.314–16.

⁸¹ Dōgen, *Hōkyōki*, chapter 30; Kodera (1980), pp. 135–36. The translation is slightly abbreviated and altered at places. Emphasis added.

⁸² Nishida [1940] (1979), vol. 12, p. 344.

To conclude, let me reiterate that from this brief but detailed study of Dōgen’s sermons and writings that are concerned with women, the picture of “Dōgen the feminist” (if I may) emerges more convincingly, who stood by his original conviction of the equality of male and female in attaining awakening in the practice of zazen. The study also shows the fundamental importance of compassion that was at the heart of his practice. This nicely balances the image of Dōgen that tends to put stress on the philosophical and wisdom-oriented side. Moreover, Dōgen’s appreciation of the presence of women in the Buddhist tradition seems to have furthered his reflection on filial piety, compassion, and gratitude. To cultivate the sense of gratitude nurtures compassion, and compassion strengthens the awareness of gratitude. This aspect of Dōgen’s thought is subtle but as fragrantly present as plum blossoms. It is also hoped that information brought forth in this study elevate the image of women practicing zazen.

After all, is it not high time that we shed the outmoded “*hakama* trousers” and don a new pair? By so doing, we may move many steps closer to the birds in the sky and the fish in the water, the way in which honeybees collect the nectar of life without injuring the flowers, and how the moon reflecting on the surface of the water never gets wet and yet never stirs the water surface.⁸³

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Abbreviations

- DZZ *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū* 『道元禪師全集』 [Collected Works of Zen Master Dōgen]. 7 vols. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1989–1993. These volumes have different editors per volume. Vols. 3–4: Kagamishima Genryū 鏡島元隆, ed. (1988). Vol. 7: Suzuki Kauzen 鈴木格禪, Azuma Ryūshin 東隆真, Kawamura Kōdō 河村孝道, Ishikawa Rikizan 石川力山, and Itō Hidenori 伊藤秀憲, ed. (1990).
- SG Dōgen. 1990. *Shōbōgenzō* 『正法眼藏』 . [Dōgen’s Essays and Sermons]. Edited by Mizuno Yaoko 水野弥穂子. 4 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.

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- Dōgen 道元. “*Bendōwa*” 「辨道話」 [Negotiating the way, an introduction to Zen practice]. SG 1, 9–49.
- Dōgen. “*Butsudō*” 「仏道」 [The Buddha’s Path]. SG 3,11–42.
- Dōgen. *Eihei kōroku* 『永平広録』 [The record of Eihei: Dōgen’s sermons and other writings]. In *Dōgen Zenji Zenshū* [Collected Works of Zen Master Dōgen] 『道元禪師全集』 . Edited by Kagamishima Genryū 鏡島元隆. Tokyo: Shunjūsha, vols. 3–4.
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- Dōgen. “*Genjō kōan*” 「現成公案」 [Manifesting suchness]. SG 1,53–61.
- Dōgen. “*Hōgo*” 法語. In *Eihei kōroku* 『永平広録』 [The Records of Sermons and Other Writings of Master Dōgen]. Edited by Ejō 懷奘 et al. 10 vols. Compiled in DZZ 4, pp. 136–175.
- Dōgen. “*Hokke ten hokke*” 「法華転法華」 [The lotus flower turning upon itself], SG 4,429–49.
- Dōgen. “*Kattō*” 「葛藤」 [Spiritual intertwinement]. SG 2,357–69.
- Dōgen. “*Raihai tokuzui*” 「礼拝得髓」 [Rendering obeisance and thereby gaining the marrow of teaching]. In *Shōbōgenzō* 『正法眼藏』 . [Dōgen’s Essays and Sermons]. SG 2,159–83.
- Dōgen. “*Shari sōdenki*” 「舍利相伝記」 [On the transmission of the cremated ashes of Myōzen]. In DZZ 7, pp. 216–18.
- Dōgen. “*Zazenshin*” 「坐禅箴」 [The Zazen pointer]. SG 1,226–52.

⁸³ Allusions are to Dōgen’s sermon in *Eihei kōroku*, #391, above, his “*Zazenshin*” (*Shōbōgenzō*), *Hōgo* #12 above, and “*Genjō kōan*” (*Shōbōgenzō*), respectively.

- Ejō 懷奘. *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki* 『正法眼蔵随聞記』 [Records of Dōgen's Teachings]. Edited by Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎 and Nakamura Hajime 中村元, 1982. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten.
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