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Dharma Transmission in Theory and Practice

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In autumn 2004, a group of Zen priests from across North America gathered at the Great Vow Monastery in Clatskanie, Oregon, to perform a new ritual called the Dharma Heritage Ceremony. This ceremony concluded the first national conference of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association (hereafter SZBA), a new organization formed to facilitate communication and cooperation among Soto Zen priests active in North America.¹ There are at least two noteworthy features of this event. First, the SZBA limits its membership, in the words of the organizers, to “Soto Zen Buddhist priests active in North America who have received Dharma Transmission in a recognized Soto line.”² Second, they performed the Dharma Heritage Ceremony in explicit recognition of “the need for an accessible Western ceremony” that will “express a common ground of acknowledgment and affirmation for Soto priests in North America.” In other words, they want to provide a ritual forum for members of otherwise separate organizations to jointly recognize and confirm the dharma transmissions that have been granted by their peers. Both features highlight the continued importance of dharma transmission rituals for Zen Buddhists and, accordingly, raise questions relevant not just to the participants in this event but also to the larger field of Buddhist Studies: What exactly is dharma transmission? What have been its roles in Zen lore, Zen history, Zen ritual, and Zen institutions? To what extent is it strictly a private or even secret affair, involving only teacher and student, and in what ways does it involve rituals of public affirmation

and institutional power? What issues arise when Zen teachers attempt to transplant these various aspects of dharma transmission into twenty-first-century North America?

These questions are too numerous and each one far too complex and multifaceted to address adequately in this short chapter. We can, however, place dharma transmission within a conceptual and historical context that will help us better understand the issues presented by these questions.³ I will divide my presentation into three broad themes: (1) the familial ideal of the dharma transmission in East Asia; (2) the vicissitudes of dharma transmission in the history of Sōtō Zen in Japan; and (3) issues presented by dharma transmission in America.⁴

Familial Structure

My point of departure will be Dōgen (1200–1253), the Japanese Buddhist teacher regarded as the founder of the Sōtō Zen lineages that flourish in Japan and that recently have been transplanted to North America. In his essay “Butsudō,” Book 44 of his *Shōbōgenzō* (True Dharma Eye Collection), Dōgen makes two key assertions. First, he identifies Buddhism or, rather, authentic Buddhism with the dharma transmission of the Zen lineage:

From Sakyamuni Buddha to Caoxi Huineng there are 34 ancestors Therefore, the True Dharma Eye Collection has been passed down from heir to heir to our own time. The authentic life of the Buddha dharma exists only in this authentic transmission. Because the Buddha dharma has been properly transmitted in this manner, it is bestowed on heir after heir.⁵

Scholars normally interpret this kind of assertion as an example of sectarian rhetoric, in which members of the Zen school declare their superiority over rival schools. Immediately after this assertion, however, Dōgen denies that Zen is a particular sect or school of Buddhism. He claims that real Buddhism is united. Only the enemies of Buddhism would attempt to divide it into sects. Dōgen says:

People who have never understood this principle, irrationally and mistakenly talk about the True Dharma Eye Collection, Marvelous Heart of Nirvana. They irrationally refer to it as the “Zen School.” . . . In India and China, from ancient times to the present day, there has never existed anything called the “Zen School.”⁶

Dōgen then goes on to say:

Know that those fellows who would go so far as to refer to the great wisdom that is authentically transmitted from Buddha to Buddha as “the Zen School” are people who even in their dreams have never seen Buddha wisdom, never heard it, and never transmitted it. Do not permit yourselves to think that those who refer to themselves as “the Zen School” have any knowledge of the Buddha dharma. This name, “the Zen School”: Who uses it? None of the Buddhas or ancestral teachers ever have. Know that the name “Zen School” is used by Māra, the Tempter (Ma Hajun; Māra Pāpiyas). Whoever uses the designations of Māra must be Māra’s companions. They are not descendants of the Buddha.⁷

If we look past Dōgen’s reference to Māra, his statements need not be interpreted as a pronouncement of religious doctrine. They might simply describe the facts on the ground that he had observed while in China. When Dōgen studied Buddhism in China, he was an outsider in a strange land. As an outsider, he noticed and wrote about many things that most likely would have seemed perfectly normal, and therefore beneath notice, to people raised in that culture. One of the things that Dōgen noticed was that all the major Buddhist monasteries in China during the early thirteenth century, the monasteries that had received government plaques designating them as Chan (Zen) monasteries, were simply officially recognized public monasteries. All the officially recognized members of the Buddhist clergy in China—the people whom we normally label as Chan (Zen) monks or nuns—were simply legally ordained members of the Buddhist sangha. Within these official public monasteries, people might engage in a wide variety of Buddhist practices, such as Tiantai (J. Tendai) or Huayan (J. Kegon) or Pure Land, but they also practiced sitting Zen (*zazen*), and all of them studied under teachers affiliated with what we would call the Zen lineage (*zenshū*). Outside of these elite public institutions, there also existed countless other private Buddhist or quasi-Buddhist establishments patronized by ordinary people and staffed by pseudo-members of the clergy (*weilan seng*) who lacked proper ordinations. In Dōgen’s eyes, no doubt, the practices of common people and self-proclaimed priests could not be equated with authentic Buddhism. He identified authentic Buddhism with the official monasteries, which the state had designated as Chan/Zen. Therefore, Dōgen’s assertions conflate sectarian rhetoric (only Zen is authentic) with the Chinese legal policy of labeling state-recognized monasteries as Chan/Zen.⁸

In Japan, Zen eventually came to be seen as one sect among many; but in China and in Korea (and nominally in Vietnam), the mainstream monastic

elite identified themselves with Zen.⁹ When viewed in terms of the clerical elite, in other words, Zen clearly constitutes the most successful form of Buddhism in East Asia. Why has it been so successful? In 1987, John Jorgensen suggested one answer. It is basically the same explanation that Dōgen gave. To wit: “The authentic life of the Buddha dharma exists only in this authentic transmission.” In other words, Zen is the predominant form of Buddhism because of dharma transmission. Jorgensen gives the same explanation, but he uses different terminology. Jorgensen writes that Zen is the most prominent form of Buddhism because it is the most Chinese of any form of Buddhism. It is the most Chinese because it is the form of Buddhism that is closest to Confucianism. It is Confucian because it conforms to traditional Chinese family values. Like any good Confucian family, it has ancestors whom it honors. It honors those ancestors by transmitting their legacy to proper descendants, from generation to generation, who will maintain and carry on their family traditions. We can complete Jorgensen’s explanation by saying that in Zen this process of transmitting a family legacy is given structural form through the ritual of dharma transmission. If we consider Zen dharma transmission as an expression of Chinese social norms for family structure and for the proper behavior of familial heirs, then several key features seem to apply equally to family relationships within secular society and within dharma lineages. These features span many different dimensions. Some of the more obvious ones are as follows:

(1) *Ancestral dimension*: Ancestors (*so*) constitute a fundamental source of power (both benevolent and malevolent) within East Asian kinship systems and religious life. People in positions of responsibility must devote much ritual effort (whether in the form of Confucian, Buddhist, or Daoist rites) to commemorate the ancestors of their clan, of their household, and of their immediate family to ensure that the ancestors will attain exaltation among the living and, equally, among the celestial realms populated by similar ancestors. The status of the living can be enhanced by high-status ancestors, even if the ancestors attain that higher status posthumously.¹⁰ Because the Buddhist order (*sangha*) constitutes a pseudo-kinship group with its own dharma clans (*shū*), dharma households (*ka*), and dharma families, the members of that order must perform similar rites to commemorate their spiritual ancestors. Accordingly, Chinese Buddhist monasteries have ancestral halls (*sodō*; sometimes translated as “patriarch halls”) that conform to traditional Confucian norms.¹¹

(2) *Biological dimension*: The biological creation of new life is the great mystery. It cannot be explained in words. It cannot be defined by science. Everyone knows that this dimension lies at the core of the family, but it is

private. Outsiders normally have no right to talk about it. Outsiders can only see and talk about other dimensions. In Zen as well, the spiritual creation of a new Buddha is the great mystery. It cannot be explained in words. It cannot be explained by science or causality. In Zen, this is something that “only a Buddha together with a Buddha” (*yuibutsu yobutsu*) can “transmit mind-to-mind” (*isshin denshin*). Everyone knows that this dimension lies at the core of dharma transmission, but it is private. It takes place inside the room (*shit-sunai*). Outsiders normally have no right to talk about it.¹² Outsiders can only see and talk about other dimensions. Nonetheless, some of the secrets are known. Medieval Zen dharma transmission documents abound with biological terminology. For example, failure to find a proper heir is called “the sin of cutting off the Buddha seed” (*dan busshu no tsumi*). This biological terminology is not just metaphorical. In some rituals, the teacher and heir write a portion of the transmission documents with ink that they make by mixing their own blood together. They get this blood by taking a small knife and cutting the underside of their tongues. The tongue is the organ by which a Buddha gives birth to a new Buddha by teaching the dharma.¹³

(3) *Linguistic dimension*: Parents give children their names, both their ancestral family names as well as their personal names. As children mature and move out into the world, the children can acquire other names and titles. Nonetheless, the name received from one’s parents will remain the most personal one. Buddhist teachers likewise bestow names on their heirs. Historically, they bestowed the family name “Shaku” and a personal dharma name (*hōki*). The family name “Shaku” derives from Sakya, the family name of the Buddha Sakyamuni (Shakamuni). Buddhist monks and nuns can use many other names and titles (*gō*), but in important documents they always include the dharma name given by their teacher.¹⁴ In modern Japan, the Japanese government restricted the scope of this linguistic dimension after 1872 when it began to regulate family names. Since that time, Buddhist clergy have retained their secular family names.

(4) *Ritual dimension*: There are proper ways that children bow to their ancestors, bow to their grandparents, and bow to their parents. Most important of all, there are proper ways that children should conduct funeral rites for their parents and memorial rituals for their ancestors. If they do not conduct any of these rituals properly, then they are not their parents’ heirs. Conversely, even an illegitimate child—or a child who has been disowned—can assert (and, perhaps, even regain) his lineage by performing these rituals properly. These exact same rituals are practiced in Zen monasteries. The order of dharma succession also plays a role. The number-one heir should act as master of ceremonies, and the other heirs should be lined up in order: number two,

number three, and so forth. In addition, there are special Buddhist ceremonies for honoring one's teacher. In Zen temples, the most important one is the ritual offering of incense on behalf of one's teacher (*shikō* or *shijō kō*) that is performed as part of the ceremony when one is inaugurated (*kaidō*) as the abbot of a temple or monastery. Another one is the annual lectures that one performs to commemorate the death anniversary of a deceased teacher. There also exist private or secret rituals like the one mentioned above when the teacher and student write out dharma transmission documents.¹⁵ The ceremonies themselves are secret, but the documents survive.¹⁶ In premodern times, these kinds of documents had value not merely because of their contents but because of the process by which they were produced. They would be written by hand, over a period of many months, in the same handwriting as that of the person who possesses it. Therefore, they could serve as legal witnesses to demonstrate that the person who possessed them actually completed a course of training.

(5) *Legal dimension*: Parents have a legal obligation to discipline their children. If the children break the law, then the parents can be punished. Likewise, the parents have a moral obligation to feed, clothe, shelter, and educate their children. And the children must reciprocate. Children have a legal obligation to obey their parents. As they become older and able to earn a living, children have a moral obligation to feed, clothe, shelter, and care for their parents. Modern societies no longer recognize religious jurisdiction. In premodern times, though, Buddhist monasteries governed their own residents with full legal authority. Teachers had the legal right to discipline and beat their disciples. And monks and nuns had the legal obligation to obey their teachers. Secular courts could punish teachers if their disciples broke the law. There was one way in which the legal situation differed between Buddhists and secular families. In a secular family, the economic power of the family head to spend the family property was unchecked. Buddhists, on the other hand, always were trying to come up with new ways to ensure that abbots of temples would not misappropriate temple funds or property. Usually, the main patrons of the temple, the heads of locally important families, and local government officials would exercise some oversight on temple finances. Legal aspects also include the rights of inheritance. Certain children inherit personal property and have the right to dispose of it. Just as in secular families, dharma heirs inherit their teacher's personal property and have the right to dispose of it. This brings us to another dimension.

(6) *Institutional and financial dimension*: Certain children may inherit the family business. They learn the family craft, the traditional recipes, the secret

ingredients, and so forth, so that they maintain family traditions. Other children might go off and pursue employment somewhere else. Even these other children, however, have a financial obligation to their home. They should send financial contributions back to support the main household. They should physically return to the main household on important ritual occasions and contribute money for those rituals. Dharma heirs normally inherit something of their teacher's personality. This is what Dōgen refers to as home style or family style (*kajō*). Only dharma heirs can legitimately use the same vocabulary, the same teaching methods, and perform ceremonies in the same way as their teacher. But this is not a requirement. Dharma transmission can occur without the heirs having to master their teacher's style. In some cases, heirs might also inherit the same temple or monastery. In thirteenth-century China, the elite, state-recognized monasteries could not be passed down from one abbot to that abbot's own students. Other smaller, privately sponsored temples and monasteries, though, usually were handed down within one's own lineage.¹⁷ By the twentieth century (if not earlier), the abbotship of both types of temples was reserved for the previous abbot's dharma heirs, each of whom would be identified as the inheritor of the True Dharma Eye Collection (*Zhengfayanrang*, J. *Shōbōgenzō*).¹⁸ In all cases, though, when dharma heirs leave the monastery and become teachers in a different location, they nonetheless owe an economic obligation to their home temple. They must send alms back to support it. They should physically return to it on important ritual occasions, such as the inauguration of a new abbot.

(7) *Temporal dimension*: Finally, almost all of these dimensions presuppose that ancestors, parents, and children exist together at the same time. A long-term, continuous relationship is not strictly required, but the longer the relationship and the fewer interruptions, then the more strongly felt and deeply rooted these other dimensions are likely to be.

These seven dimensions (ancestral, biological, linguistic, ritual, legal, business and financial, temporal) lie at the heart of the Chinese family system. I think (as John Jorgensen suggests) that they also play indispensable roles in the social structure of Chan/Zen and of the Buddhist Sangha in East Asia. This family model is easier to see when using an East Asian language, like Chinese or Japanese, because the same terminology is used in both contexts. Chinese, especially, has a very highly developed vocabulary for ancestors, grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, older and younger siblings, cousins, and so forth. The Buddhist clergy uses similar vocabulary to refer to dharma families, with dharma ancestors, dharma grandparents, dharma parents, dharma aunts, dharma uncles, dharma brothers and sisters, and so forth. To be

ordained is to join a dharma family that functions exactly like any other family, with the same Confucian family values and the same Confucian family expectations and obligations.

Dharma transmission is inherently multidimensional. None of these seven dimensions always exists in every case. There are many historical examples where the Zen tradition has accepted a dharma transmission as legitimate even though one or more of these dimensions were missing. There are other cases where the lack of only one of these dimensions would cause a dharma transmission to be rejected and labeled illegitimate. Indeed, one of the reasons that dharma transmission has proved to be such a powerful source of Zen's success is because of its inherent flexibility. As T. Griffith Foulk points out, dharma transmission is both concrete and abstract.¹⁹ Every link in the genealogy of dharma transmission occurs in documented historical circumstances: a specific place and time, identifiable individuals, and specific words and actions. At the same time, though, Zen texts also assert that true dharma transmission consists of no transmission. In other words, it occurs only mind-to-mind. Nothing is actually handed down from teacher to student. Each generation awakens to his or her own authentication of the Buddhas.

Therefore, Foulk notes that when the historical evidence is in one's favor, one can demonstrate the validity of dharma transmission by citing any number of the aforementioned seven dimensions. When the historical evidence is less favorable, then one can shift the argument to the religious realm by arguing that the only facts that really matter are the depths and quality of one's Buddha realization. This religious realm constitutes an eighth dimension. Every dharma transmission reenacts a mythological model, as illustrated by the fact that traditional Zen histories, such as the *Jingde Era Transmission of the Flame*,²⁰ locate the origin of the Zen lineage not with Sakyamuni (a.k.a. Gautama, the historical Buddha), but with the Seven Buddhas of the Past (*shichibutsu*). These mythological Buddhas place the origins of dharma transmission outside of time and outside of our world. They demonstrate its immutable validity for all times and all worlds.

The inherent flexibility of dharma transmission tells us that historical evidence alone can never legitimate nor invalidate any particular case of dharma transmission. Ultimately, it is a matter of religious faith, an expression of a sacred truth. This kind of truth lies beyond the reach of historical criticism. In medieval Japan, this religious truth was more powerful than any doctrinal argument. Consider, for example, the following episode in which the Japanese Zen priest Enni Ben'en (1202–1280) easily defeated a Confucian critic named Sugawara Tamenaga (1158–1246) merely by invoking the aura of dharma transmission:

The minister [Kujō Michiie (1193–1252)] said: “Lord Sugawara is the greatest Confucian in our kingdom. He always grumbles about Buddhist dominance over Confucianism. Now let the two advocates meet and resolve this matter in debate.”

Enni said: “I have heard that Lord Sugawara is a student of Confucian policies. Is this correct?”

The councilor [Sugawara], in a very dignified manner, replied: “Correct.”

Enni continued: “The Buddha dharma is handed down from buddha to buddha and transmitted from ancestor to ancestor. Anything not received from one’s teacher is a false proposition. Accordingly, I am a fifty-fifth generation descendant of Sakyamuni Buddha and a twenty-seventh generation heir of Ancestor Bodhidharma. Although I cannot claim that deep arrows from their mighty bows have pierced my humble fabric, nonetheless based on this lineage I call myself a son of Sakya [i.e., a Buddhist]. Confucians no doubt conform to similar standards. Lord, do you not know what generation descendant of Confucius you are?”

The councilor, teeth clinched, withdrew. [Later] he told a bystander, “I wanted to contest Enni’s doctrines, but when he spoke of genealogy I could not evade his stipulations.”²¹

This incident tells us that the spiritual power of dharma transmission was recognized even by people, like this Confucian scholar, who opposed Zen teachings. It is this spiritual power that breathes life into the various other familial dimensions so that they might function more fully as social realities in the lives of Buddhist priests. The spiritual power of dharma transmission encapsulates these dimensions in a mythological framework, unites them in genealogical terminology, and reveals them through concrete ritual performances.²² As a result, all properly ordained members of the priesthood could partially share in some of these familial dimensions whether they received dharma transmission or not.

Dharma Transmission in Japanese Sōtō Zen

My analysis of the vicissitudes of dharma transmission in the history of Sōtō Zen in Japan begins with three key points: dharma transmission replicates Chinese family values; it conveys great spiritual power and authority; and it is inherently flexible and multidimensional, so that no single criteria always

exists in every case. We can see evidence for these three points repeatedly in the history of Sōtō Zen in Japan. Nonetheless, since 1703, official Sōtō doctrine has stipulated that dharma transmission must conform to two criteria, which supposedly describe the norms that Dōgen introduced from China. This Dōgen model demands exclusive authentication from no more than one teacher (*isshi inshō*) and face-to-face bestowal of succession (*menju shihō*). The first condition prohibits clerics from inheriting more than one lineage. The second condition prohibits conferral by proxy, conferral at a distance to strangers, or posthumous conferral. This is the official doctrine. The actual meaning of these terms and the historical evidence for them, however, is not completely clear. There are numerous examples in Japanese Sōtō history that deviate from these stipulations. Since I already have discussed this topic elsewhere,²³ below I will only briefly summarize a few well-known cases.

First, Dōgen's own community of disciples seems to have incorporated at least three separate dharma lineages. Thirty-five years before Dōgen traveled to China, a Japanese monk named Nōnin (fl. 1189) already was teaching Zen in Japan. Nōnin had never been to China, but he had received a mail-order (*yōfu*) dharma transmission from the Chinese teacher Fozhao Deguang (Busshō Tokkō; 1121–1203). Nōnin then bestowed dharma transmission on Ekan (d. 1251), who in turn bestowed dharma transmission on Gikai (1219–1309). Afterward, Ekan and Gikai (along with Ekan's other disciples) joined Dōgen's community in 1241. According to Gikai's writings, Dōgen told Gikai that his dharma lineage—from Deguang to Nōnin to Ekan to Gikai—was a legitimate lineage and that Gikai had been most fortunate to receive dharma transmission. Dōgen himself had two Zen teachers. First he studied under Myōzen (1184–1225), who had inherited a Zen lineage from Eisai (1141–1215). After Myōzen died, then Dōgen studied under Rujing (1163–1227). Modern biographies always note that Dōgen succeeded to Rujing's Sōtō lineage. Biographies written during the medieval period also state that Dōgen had inherited a dharma lineage from Myōzen. The actual facts of the matter are not clear. Nonetheless, it is certain that at least some members of the early Sōtō community believed that Dōgen had inherited two dharma lineages, one from Myōzen and a second one from Rujing. The history of Rujing's own dharma lineage is clear: it had been recreated by means of a posthumous transmission by proxy. Rujing traced his lineage back to Touzi Yiqing (Tōsu Gisei; 1032–1083) in the forty-fourth generation and through Touzi to Dayang Jingxuan (Taiyō Kyōgen; 942–1027) in the forty-third generation. Dayang Jingxuan died in 1027. Touzi Yiqing was born five years later, in 1032. These two generations are connected by a priest of another lineage named Fushan Fayuan (Fuzan

Hōon; 991–1067). Thus, Touzi Yiqing received his Sōtō dharma transmission from Dayang Jingxuan by the posthumous proxy (*daifu*) of an outsider.

Similar incidents occurred in Japan. The famous early Sōtō patriarch Keizan Jōkin (1264–1325) bestowed dharma transmission on Kohō Kakumyō (1271–1361). In 1325 when Keizan died, however, Kohō Kakumyō abandoned his Sōtō connections. He founded his own Zen temple, Unjuji, with the support of a patron who wanted to sponsor someone in the Rinzai lineage of Shinichi Kakushin (1207–1298). When Kohō Kakumyō performed his inauguration ceremony at Unjuji temple, therefore, he offered his succession incense in the name of Shinichi Kakushin, a teacher under whom he had studied briefly some twenty-eight years earlier. At the time when Kohō Kakumyō performed this ritual, Shinichi Kakushin had been deceased for some twenty-seven years. Kohō Kakumyō succeeded to his lineage posthumously. Thereafter, all of Kohō Kakumyō's disciples inherited the Rinzai Zen lineage of Shinichi Kakushin. Keizan's disciple Gasan Jōseki (1276–1366) was involved in a similar arrangement. Among Gasan's many dharma heirs were the two monks Mutei Ryōshō (1313–1361) and Gessen Ryōin (1319–1400). Mutei founded Shōbōji temple in northern Japan but died shortly thereafter. At the time of his death, Mutei did not have a disciple who was ready to become head of that temple. Therefore, Mutei's teacher Gasan Jōseki sent Gessen Ryōin to Shōbōji temple to become a posthumous dharma heir.

Today, in retrospect, these kinds of dharma transmission practices might seem irregular. Before condemning them, though, first we should remember the social conditions of the historical period during which they occurred. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were times of warfare and social unrest. Communications were difficult, and travel between regions of Japan could be dangerous. Most Sōtō Zen communities were isolated in rural areas. They did not know what was happening elsewhere. Zen itself was still relatively new in Japan. In most areas, the local Zen teacher was the first and only Zen teacher that anyone had ever seen. Thus, there were no established norms or social expectations.²⁴ These kinds of norms became established only after the Sōtō Zen had grown large enough to develop into regional networks of Zen temples.

As regional networks of Zen temples developed in Japan, dharma transmission became a central ritual in their organizational structure. Unlike the state-sponsored public monasteries of China, where the dharma heirs of the previous abbot were forbidden from succeeding their teacher to become the next abbot, in Japan abbotship succession and dharma transmission were tied together. It did not always work. As in the case of Shōbōji temple, mentioned previously, sometimes an abbot might die without having produced a

dharma heir. In that case, an adopted heir would have to be brought in. Sometimes, the opposite situation existed. The previous abbot had produced a dharma heir and appointed him as his successor, but for whatever reason he did not become the new abbot. In early Sōtō history, a very famous case of this problem arose at Daijōji monastery. Daijōji was founded by Gikai (1219–1309). Gikai appointed Keizan Jōkin as his successor. Keizan Jōkin appointed Meihō Sotetsu (1277–1350) as his successor. Keizan then left Daijōji and founded a new monastery called Yōkōji. Shortly thereafter, something went wrong at Daijōji. We do not know the details, but Daijōji's main patrons became dissatisfied with Meihō Sotetsu and kicked him out of the monastery. In his writings, Keizan mentions the existence of a problem with the lay patrons of Daijōji, but he does not explain what it might have been.²⁵ This incident at Daijōji and the case of Kohō Kakumyō at Unjuji are the only two where the historical record specifically mentions the role of the patron in determining who could serve as abbot. Nonetheless, patrons always played a major role in the selection of abbots. Lay people form strong attachments to the Buddhist teachers whom they sponsor. They want to know that their previous teacher's legacy will continue under his successor. Moreover, throughout most of Buddhist history, people have always been taught that great karmic merit is generated by having a priest in the family. Thus, historically, whenever a very rich or very powerful family sponsored a Buddhist temple, almost invariably some of the offspring of that family became monks or nuns at that temple. As children of the main sponsors, they would be expected to receive dharma transmission and to be promoted to the abbotship. Thus, the patron's involvement in monastic succession goes without saying.

As a result of Meihō Sotetsu's setback at Daijōji, Keizan wrote guidelines for the appointments of abbots. These guidelines were not fully implemented until a couple of generations later, during the time of Tsūgen Jakurei (1322–1391), Baisan Monpon (d. 1417), and Jochū Tengin (1365–1440). These are the three people who developed the institutional structure of Sōtō Zen in medieval Japan. Tsūgen and Baisan established rotating abbotship (*rinjū*) at the major monasteries of Sōjiji (in Noto), Yōtakuji (in Settsu) and Ryūtakuji (in Echizen). From these three centers, rotating abbotships became the norm for other major monasteries.²⁶ Rotating abbotships link networks of temples together according to the dharma lineage of their abbots. There is a head temple at the center, surrounded by branch temples. The founders of the branch temples are dharma heirs of the founder of the head temple. The abbotship of the head temple is passed in regular sequence among candidates who are promoted by the branch temples. If there are four branch temples—branch A, branch B, branch C, and branch D, for example—then the abbotship of the

head temple first goes to a candidate from A, then B, then C, then D, and then the cycle repeats by going back to A. So long as each new abbot represented a different branch temple, then the main temple would benefit from the political loyalty, the financial support, and the most able teachers of several affiliated temples. This system also helped to promote growth and stability by providing a surplus of retired abbots. These surplus retired abbots always could return to help when any difficulties or problems arose. And, when they were not needed, they could travel to new regions and found new branch temples.

A key element in this system of rotating abbotships was the requirement that anyone who received dharma transmission at any of the branch temples had to assume at least one rotating term as abbot of the main temple. Moreover, a rotating term as abbot required a major financial contribution. Usually, this financial contribution took the form of a donation in honor of the dharma ancestors enshrined at the main temple. Thus, receiving dharma transmission imposed a heavy institutional and financial responsibility. Anyone who received dharma transmission had to become an administrator and had to become a fundraiser. These were obligations that many people tried to avoid. Tsūgen, Baisan, and Jochū each demanded that future generations excommunicate any Zen teacher who failed to fulfill his obligation to serve as abbot of a head temple. Baisan decreed that the obedient Zen successors should seize defiant ones and then burn the offender's succession certificate (*shisho*) before his eyes.²⁷ Note the remarkable inversion that has occurred here. Instead of dharma transmission being a qualification for becoming an abbot, successful service as abbot has become a requirement for being allowed to retain one's dharma transmission. In other words, anyone who does not support the family and the ancestors will be disinherited and stripped of his or her religious status.

Being abbot also has its personal rewards. First, during the medieval period, the abbot's quarters (*hōjō*) of head temples were the only places where one could find copies of the writings of major Japanese Zen teachers, such as Dōgen and Keizan. Anyone who wanted unfettered access to their writings would have had to serve as abbot of a head temple. Second, over time, the title of "retired abbot" (*senjū*) of a head temple came to provide priests with special authority or certification as Zen teachers. Without this experience, priests might find it difficult to attract students. Finally, it opened doors. The more prestigious the head temple at which one had served a term as abbot, the more easily one could gain access to other temples and to the ears of people of power. Ambitious Zen priests, therefore, naturally wanted to acquire the title of "retired abbot" of a prestigious head temple. The most prestigious head temple was Sōjiji, which always has stood at the head of the largest networks

of temples. During the medieval period, Sōjiji won recognition by the aristocratic court, so that anyone who served a rotating term as abbot at Sōjiji (even if only for a few days) became eligible for a purple robe. Purple is the royal color, which can be awarded only by the ruler. A purple robe was one of the most prestigious awards any Buddhist monk could receive. As such, it could be obtained only with substantial contributions to the court and to Sōjiji. These contributions were justified by the symbolic value (or capital) of the purple robe. Receiving it not only enhanced the personal status of the individual priest but also that of his local community of supporters and his peers within the same network of temples. By conferring royal authority on the individual priest, the robe also brought great prestige and honor to his home temple and generated great karmic merit for everyone who had contributed alms for its acquisition. Simultaneously, it also denoted a mark of recognition for the priest's dharma lineage, his teachers, and his peers. Without their support and cooperation, a priest could never achieve the honor of a temporary term as abbot at a major monastery like Sōjiji. Thus, the collective membership (priest, peers, and lay patrons) of the local Zen circle confer status on one of their members.

In this way, the temporary term as abbot represents a public confirmation of the legitimacy of one's dharma transmission. This expression of public confirmation eventually became ritualized as the *zuise* (literally, auspicious debut) ceremony of honorary abbotship.²⁸ Today in Japan, a Sōtō cleric cannot be officially installed as abbot of a dharma temple (*hōchi*; i.e., major temple) without first attaining certification from the Sōtō Headquarters (Sōtōshū shūmuchō).²⁹ One of the requirements for that certification is the performance of *zuise* ceremonies, during which a priest will act as honorary abbot for the duration of one full day (*ichiya jūshoku*) at the Sōtō School's two head temples: Sōjiji (the monastery founded by Keizan) and Eiheiiji (the monastery founded by Dōgen). As honorary abbot, the most important ritual consists of honoring ancestors of each temple, generating ritual merit on their behalf, and presenting offerings (*hōon kin*) to them. At Sōjiji, the honorary abbot presents offerings to Sōjiji's first two abbots: Keizan and Gasan Jōseki. At Eiheiiji, he presents offerings to its first two abbots: Dōgen and Ejō (1198–1280).³⁰ This requirement for honorary abbotship at both temples seems designed to foster unity. Regardless of temple network or dharma lineage, all senior priests should recognize the authority of both Sōjiji and Eiheiiji. And, Sōjiji and Eiheiiji should receive and welcome all Sōtō teachers irrespective of their affiliation.

Historically, though, *zuise* was developed not to unify but as a weapon to divide. The leaders of Eiheiiji always sought to enhance its importance based

on the idea that it is the true ancestral temple of the entire Sōtō school because it was founded by Dōgen. The leaders of Sōjiji always resisted Eihei's assertions based on the fact that Sōjiji is the actual head of the largest network of temples in Japan. Throughout the course of this rivalry, Sōjiji has repeatedly issued proclamations asserting that anyone who received honors at Eihei would never be allowed back into a temple affiliated with Sōjiji.³¹ The power of Sōjiji's threat rested on its authority over dharma transmission. Anyone who violated Sōjiji's policies could not become abbot at any temple affiliated to Sōjiji's dharma lineage. Moreover, they could not become abbot at any temple outside of Sōjiji's temple network either, because their dharma transmission would be recognized only by temples affiliated to their own lineage. If a Zen teacher wanted to assume a position at a temple that belonged to another dharma faction, then that Zen teacher would have to renounce his or her previous dharma lineage and accept a new one based on the new temple. In Japanese Sōtō, this process is called changing (*eki*) one's lineage (*shi*) in accordance (*in*) with one's temple (*in*), or *in'in ekishi*.³²

Today, there is a tendency to regard these kinds of sectarian rivalries as little more than petty squabbles that are beneath the dignity of great religious institutions. In reality, though, they might very well reflect the flip side of the Confucian family model found in Zen. On the one hand, traditional family values ensure cohesion and strength. Everyone pulls together and supports one another. Their loyalty to the family traditions and desire to maintain family honor help produce high standards of performance that can withstand public scrutiny. At the same time, though, all the other members of the family exert considerable influence and control over one another. They can place severe demands on other family members. When these demands are combined with institutional power, sectarian rivalries are almost inevitable. Family-run enterprises—regardless of their nature—exhibit these same kinds of conflicts. Some Western observers have suggested that one of the reasons that some Zen teachings seem to so strongly emphasize Western-sounding notions of liberation, freedom, spontaneity, and self-reliance is because they provide a self-critique of the very strong, group-oriented, social structures of traditional Japanese society and its Confucian family norms.³³ While consideration of that suggestion lies outside the scope of this paper, it does remind us that Zen teachings (like teachings of any religion) acquire their scope and significance from within specific contexts of belief.

Since the 1880s when the Sōtō School in Japan began to reorganize itself in response to the demands of modernization, Zen in Japan has gradually been turning away from the family structure and temple networks described above. As Japanese society moves away from traditional Confucian family

values, it is only natural that the Sōtō School does likewise. Today, the Sōtō headquarters (Shūmūchō) relies on a variety of checks and balances—built around not just traditional monastic training but also bureaucratic committees and educational degrees—to maintain the standards of its clergy.³⁴ On paper, at least, there are four broad classes of temples, each one of which has different criteria for selection of abbots.³⁵ There are two levels of supervisory certification (*shike* and *jun shike*), without which one cannot serve as a Zen master in charge of the ninety-day retreats (*ango*) at a certified monastic training center (*ninka sanzen dōjō*).³⁶ There are eight ecclesiastical grades (*sōkai*) based on a combination of academic learning and dharma seniority as evaluated by review committees.³⁷ Finally, there are four levels of dharma seniority (*hōkai*) based on monastic training, age, and religious attainments.³⁸ These different types of certification, grade, and seniority overlap in a bewildering variety of ways.

What I find most significant about this system of ecclesiastical grades is that dharma transmission provides access to only a relatively low grade. It is listed as a requirement for the very lowest ecclesiastical status, that of an instructor third class (*santō kyōshi*). Thus, in present day Sōtō Zen, dharma transmission constitutes a preliminary step, after which one's real development begins. The relatively low status of dharma transmission means that in and of itself it does not qualify one to accept students or to train disciples. According to the regulations, Zen students should be supervised only by a teacher who has attained supervisory certification (i.e., *sanzen dōjō shike* status), that is, someone who in the popular literature might be called a Zen master. To attain supervisory certification requires not just high ecclesiastical grades and dharma seniority but also at least three years' experience as an assistant supervisor at a specially designated training hall (*tokubetsu sōdō*), during which time one undergoes an apprenticeship. This monastic apprenticeship agrees with the popular image of Zen Buddhism as a form of extreme asceticism. The popular image, however, reflects only a limited view of Zen life. These training halls are found at only about one hundred of the nearly 14,000 temples that constitute the modern Sōtō school. The vast majority of Sōtō Zen religious activities occur not at the training halls but at the local temples.

Today, the key authority conferred by dharma transmission is that it qualifies a priest to manage an ordinary (*jun hōchi*) local temple. These temples are not sites of ascetic training but of ceremonial services on behalf of lay patrons. Lay involvement in local temples typically includes the priests' own families. Since the government legalized clerical marriage in 1872, the family model of Buddhist relationships has gradually become actualized in biological form as more and more Zen priests have married and raised chil-

dren.³⁹ As a result of this transformation to a married clergy, in modern Sōtō it is common for ordinary temples to be handed down from father to son. A son will enter the clergy, undergo a brief period of training under a certified supervisor at a training monastery, and then return home where he will eventually receive dharma transmission from his biological father and inherit his father's temple. Since this practice reflects individual family circumstances, it exhibits many variations. There is at least one notable variation that (to the best of my knowledge) has not been discussed in scholarly literature, namely, temple families with daughter(s) but no son. Here, as in secular society, the daughter assumes responsibility for continuing the family line. The daughter's husband can assume her family name, which will enable him to join the family, enter the priesthood, and eventually receive dharma transmission from her father. But what happens when the daughter divorces her husband? As likely as not (it seems), not only will the man lose his wife, but he also will lose his dharma transmission. He certainly will not be welcome to inherit his former father-in-law's temple. And it is very unlikely that another temple would accept him with his outside lineage. This atypical example illustrates how a bonding ritual of inclusion can—when circumstances change—become a ritual of exclusion.

Dharma Transmission Issues

No one can predict what future roles dharma transmission might play among the nascent Zen communities of North America. The communities are very diverse, too new, and many of them remain in a state of flux. It does seem clear, though, that North America presents a cultural environment that differs greatly from that of traditional East Asia. However much Zen rituals might be performed in a similar manner within this new culture, in so far as they must function within a different context of belief (where neither the world imagined nor the world lived is the same as that of East Asia) one must question whether the same kinds of ethos or religious meaning can be conveyed by those rituals.⁴⁰ This question applies not just to areas outside of East Asia, of course, but also among the various regions within it and across their respective historical developments. People around the world who were raised within modern urban environments might well share more cultural assumptions with one another than they would with their own ancestors of two or three generations previous who had lived in preindustrial rural societies. Nonetheless, if we focus simply on dharma transmission within North America, then even at this premature stage we can identify several areas of dissonance.

First, if, as suggested above, dharma transmission replicates the values of the Confucian family model, then how will that model fit into a society where families lack multigenerational cohesiveness or where family roles seem to be so much in flux that the definition of family itself has become subject to political debate? Can a religious practice continue to draw strength from a secular model that is foreign to its practitioners?⁴¹ The traditional Asian ideals of honoring ancestors, filial piety, and hereditary privilege seem to directly conflict many celebrated American values, especially notions of personal freedom, individual autonomy, and egalitarian self (re-)invention. Second, what mythological framework will inspire North American interpretations of dharma transmission? Today the traditional Zen mythos—with its stories of the Seven Buddhas of the Past, of Sakyamuni Buddha holding up a flower before his assembled disciples on Vulture Peak, and of Bodhidharma's journey to China—lacks historical authority. In the eyes of skeptics, it seems to be at best quaint and at worst a blatant falsehood. Many North Americans approach Zen more as a form of self-realization therapy than as a religious faith.⁴² It is impossible to imagine them citing their dharma lineage in public debate as did the Japanese Zen priest Enni Ben'en in the thirteenth century. Third, what religious distinction can dharma transmission convey in a society of fluid identities where even the traditional Buddhist distinction between priest and laity tends to disappear?

While dharma transmission has never been restricted exclusively to clergy, it always has been controlled by ordained members of the clergy, that is, by people who receive rites of ordination, shave their heads, and wear Buddhist robes. Within this group, dharma transmission always has been a matter of insider knowledge, discussed only by the clerical elite, who themselves have been initiated into a dharma lineage. For ordinary lay people, in contrast, the much more obvious public social distinction bestowed by ordination always has been of prime importance, since it is the people with shaved heads and Buddhist robes who can generate karmic merit for the laity by accepting their gifts. At Zen Centers in North America, however, a lay-clerical distinction based on gift giving (by laity) and generating merit (by priests) is all but meaningless. Most people see Zen (especially sitting Zen or *zazen*) as a form of self-realization or relaxation exercises that lay people can practice as well as (or better than) clerics.⁴³ Within this context, lay practitioners who might care nothing about priestly status can, nonetheless, become very concerned about dharma transmission, who has it and who does not. From conversations among practitioners at different Zen Centers, it seems each Center has developed its own individual culture of dharma transmission: here it might signify eligibility to join a Center's board of directors, there it might mark completion of a

kōan curriculum, and somewhere else it might be seen as equivalent to clerical ordination, and so forth.

These variations in the social significance assigned to dharma transmission highlight the unsettled state of North American Zen communities. Differences in their respective histories, founders, economic circumstances, and facilities have imbued each Zen Center with its own distinctive culture and idiosyncrasies. The Dharma Heritage Ceremony serves to remind Soto priests from these dissimilar Centers of the collective tradition they share. It provides a common ritual in which all of them can participate simultaneously, jointly offer homage to the founders of one another's lineages, and formally acknowledge one another as religious peers.⁴⁴ Clearly, it is designed to help foster the development of a new shared culture of dharma transmission. Each of the individual elements within the ceremony (the setting, musical instruments, processions, prostrations, circumambulations, prostrations, chants, and so forth) consist of standard Zen ritual practices as performed at Buddhist temples in Japan. The ceremony as a whole, its format and sequence as well as its emphasis on mutual affirmation, however, presents something new and uniquely American. Significantly, it concludes with all the participants chanting the Zen hymn known as the *Harmony of Difference and Sameness*, a title that aptly expresses the goal of the ceremony itself and the task now faced by the SZBA.⁴⁵ Thus, the ceremony represents a development of traditional ritual forms for new purposes in a new land. It is a development that reflects both the growing maturity of Zen traditions in North America and their precarious, difficult quest to harmonize imported and native, old and new, similar and different.⁴⁶

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included in the *Zokuzōkyō* say it was copied in 1077 in China and compiled in 1784 in Japan; see Ono, *Bussho kaisetsu daijiten*, p. 5: 84.

31. S-Chūkai 4: 628a1–5.
32. ZZ 63#1222: 15b23–c15.
33. S-Shingi 31b11.

CHAPTER 9

1. The founding members of the SZBA are: Tenshin Reb Anderson, Chozen Jan Bayes, Bernard Tetsugen Glassman, Keido Les Kaye, Jakusho Bill Kwong, Daido John Looi, Gempo Merzel, and Sojun Mel Weltsman.

2. SZBA 2004b.

3. This essay represents a substantially revised version of an address delivered at the First National conference of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, Great Vow Monastery, Caltskanie, Oregon. I thank the organizers of that event for providing me an opportunity to discuss this topic.

4. In this chapter the word “Soto” is spelled without macrons when used in reference to North America but with macrons (Sōtō) when used in reference to Japan.

5. DZZ 1.376.

6. DZZ 1.376–377.

7. DZZ 1.377.

8. Schlütter 2005, pp. 152–57.

9. Regarding China, see Welch 1963 and 1967. Regarding Korea, see Buswell 1992, pp. 22, 149–50. Vietnam presents an ambiguous case. Nguyen 1997, pp. 98–99, states that Vietnam lacks any identifiable Zen monasteries or Zen communities, but that nonetheless Vietnamese Buddhist leaders always have claimed a Zen identity whenever they wished to assert their own orthodoxy.

10. Wright 1992, pp. 39–40.

11. Yifa 2002, pp. 88–89.

12. Bodiford 1991.

13. Bodiford 2000.

14. Tamamura 1981a and 1981b; Welch 1963, pp. 136–40.

15. I use the term “transmission documents” as a collective designation for a variety texts, scrolls, certificates, diplomas, sheets of paper, and booklets, the possession of which would be restricted to initiates. These include (but are not limited to): succession certificates (*shisho*), blood lineages (*kechimyaku*), lineage charts (*shūhazu*), dharma scrolls (*hokkan*), certificates (*kirikami*), transcripts (*shōmono*), secret initiation registers (*hissanchō*), and so forth.

16. Ishikawa 2002.

17. Schlütter 2005.

18. Reichelt 1927, p. 271, and Welch 1963.

19. Foulk 1999, pp. 154–55.

20. *Jingde chuandeng lu*, fasc. 1, pp. 204b–205b.

21. *Genkō shakusho*, fasc. 7, p. 86a–b.

22. For examples of specific types of ritual performances, see Bodiford 2000 for medieval Japan and Welch 1963 for early twentieth-century China.

23. See Bodiford 1991.

24. Contemporary North America similarly lacks established norms or social expectations for its Zen Centers.

25. Bodiford 1993, pp. 64, 85–86.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–35.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

28. The term *zuise* seems to be unique to Japanese Sōtō. Kuriyama 1980, p. 201 explains it as a contraction of the standard Buddhist terms “auspicious” (*zui*) and “appearance in the world” (*shusse*), which allude to the manner in which Sakyamuni Buddha’s appearance in our world (*shutsugen o se*) was accompanied by auspicious omens. Zen texts use the word *shusse* to refer to the debut abbotship of a priest at a teaching monastery, whose inauguration as a new Zen teacher is likened to the appearance in our world of a new Buddha. The Japanese Sōtō tradition takes this idea one step further by defining an “auspicious appearance” (*zuise*) as a symbolic inauguration as an honorary abbot at Eiheiji or Sōjiji (or both).

29. Modern Japanese Sōtō recognizes four broad classes of religious establishments: head temples (*honzan*, i.e., Sōjiji and Eiheiji); teaching monasteries (*kakuchi*), where ninety-day training retreats occur at least once a year; dharma temples (*hōchi*); and ordinary temples (*jun hōchi*). For details, see Nara and Nishimura 1979, pp. 24–26.

30. The procedure for *zuise* is not included in *Shōwa shūtei Sōtōshū gyōji kihan* (1988), the comprehensive manual of Sōtō rituals compiled by the Sōtō headquarters. It is described in detail in *Sōtōshū hōshiki sahō shashin kaisetsu* (1983), which is difficult to obtain.

31. For details, see Bodiford 2006.

32. Bodiford 1991.

33. For example, Robert Bellah 1985, pp. 151–52. Bellah specifically cites Kasulis 1981, who in turn draws on Watsuji Tetsurō’s (1889–1960) notion of *nengen* (literally, the human realm) as providing an alternative view of human nature that escapes from the excessive emphasis on individuality found in European thought; see Watsuji 1996.

34. The Sōtō School is incorporated under the Religious Juridical Persons Law as an umbrella (*hōkatsu*) organization for affiliated temples and organizations, each one of which also might be independently incorporated under that same law. Under this law, the school operates in accordance with three sets of governing documents: Sōtōshū Constitution (*Sōtōshū shūken*); Regulations for the Religious Juridical Person Sōtōshū (*Shūkyō hōnin Sōtōshū kisoku*), and Sōtōshū Standard Procedures (*Sōtōshū kitei*). The first two of these are reprinted in Nara and Nishimura 1979, pp. 9–17 and 36–46. While the precise wording of these texts is subject to regular review and revision, the main outline presented in the 1979 version remains unchanged.

35. See note 9.

36. Nara and Nishimura 1979, pp. 25 and 31.

37. Ecclesiastical status reflects one's academic qualifications for providing religious instruction. The levels from bottom to top are: instructor third class (*santō kyōshi*), instructor second class (*nitō kyōshi*), instructor first class (*ittō kyōshi*), instructor proper (*sei kyōshi*), adjunct senior instructor (*gon daikyōshi*), senior instructor (*dai-kyōshi*), adjunct prefect (*gon daikyōsei*), and prefect (*daikyōsei*). See Nara and Nishimura 1979, pp. 23–24.

38. Dharma seniority reflects one's religious qualifications and devotion to traditional forms of Buddhist practice. The levels from bottom to top are: elder (*jōza*), chief seat (*zagen*), upādhyāya (*oshō*), and great upādhyāya (*daioshō*). See Nara and Nishimura 1979, pp. 23–24.

39. Jaffe 2001.

40. I am using the phrases “world imagined” and “world lived” in the senses coined by Geertz 1966 as the worldview taught by religion and the ethos enacted through religious rituals, respectively.

41. Different family models might well produce different Zen outcomes. The Zen teacher Victor Hori has noted (1994) that Chinese Americans who participated in one week-long Zen training retreat commented on how the practice helped them better comprehend their indebtedness to their families, while European Americans at the same retreat spoke only of their own personal spiritual progress. I thank David Chappell (2005) for drawing my attention to Hori's essay.

42. A very telling incident occurred in 1998 when the leader of one Zen Center in North America told the editorial board of the Soto Text Translation Project that members of his center would feel more comfortable if the translations of daily liturgy could omit the word “Buddha.”

43. Wetzel 2002.

44. The SZBA intends for the Dharma Heritage Ceremony to be performed periodically (about once every three years) and for it to move from location to location so that it will not become identified with any one Soto faction or institution (SZBA 2004b).

45. *Harmony of Difference and Sameness* is an English translation of the *Santongqi* (*Sandōkai*), a hymn or poem attributed to the priest Shitou Xiqian (J. Sekitō Kisen, pp. 700–90).

46. This quest is by no means unique to Zen communities but is faced by all minority religions whether they are splinter sects from established denominations, based in immigrant communities, or composed largely of converts. Recent years have witnessed an explosive growth in the academic study of Asian religions, particularly Buddhism, in America. For further reading, the following works can be recommended: Heine and Prebish 2003; Morreale 1998; Numrich 1996; Prebish 1999; Prebish and Baumann 2002; Prebish and Tanaka 1998; Tweed and Prothero 1999; Williams and Queen 1999; and Yoo 1999.