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Sandōkai—Harmony of Difference and Equality by Master Sekitō Kisen

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Abstract

In this enchanting paper, Zen master Ekai Korematsu Roshi goes to the heart of the poetic verses of Master Sekitō Kisen's Sandōkai, a practice of the Soto School of Zen Buddhism in Japan. The verses are included in their entirety. Ekai Korematsu Roshi's heartfelt commentary on the deeper meaning of the Sandōkai and following the way of the Buddha comes from the unbroken lineage that originated from Gautama Buddha.

Biography

Ekai Korematsu Roshi has been serving as Abbot and Resident Teacher of Jikishoan Zen Buddhist Community in Melbourne since 1999. Born in Japan in 1948, Roshi studied humanities and Buddhism in Denmark, USA, and Japan. He was ordained by Kobun Chino Roshi at Haiku Zendo, Los Altos, California in 1976 and received Dharma transmission from Ikko Narasaki Roshi in Japan at Zuiōji Monastery in 1986. His formal training was twelve years in three Zen monasteries; Eiheiji, Zuiōji, and Shōgoji. His Buddhist education is through Soto Zen Buddhism. Roshi has taught Buddhism in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, India, and the United States of America for the past forty years. Ekai Roshi is the main

Teacher and Director of Jikishoan's "Zen and Integrated Buddhist Studies" Program, and a Faculty Member of the Overseas Buddhist Studies Program Bodh Gaya India of Carleton University.

Through Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche IX's invitation, Roshi has taught at the Buddhist Summer School and Winter Zen Lectures at the E-Vam Institute in Melbourne, since 2002.

The Sandōkai is a very short, concise poetic form of verse; something that we can recite and memorise. It is part of the Soto School practice in Japan and a part of the service dedicating to the lineage. The term "Sandōkai" is the Japanese way of pronouncing the Chinese characters and was written in the eighth century. It originates from the early development of Chan Buddhism in China. "Zen" and "Chan" both mean meditation. The poem was written by the Zen Master, Sekitō Kisen. To have a master compose a document is actually quite significant. After everything is tested and examined through the practice of meditation, then certain concepts about it emerge and it is put into a document. That is the way it is presented.

As a poetry form, it is not necessary that you grasp it philosophically. You can become familiar with it and also with certain parts of it, and you then start to connect in the sense of a framework. That becomes an entry point to the Way. The more explanation or ideas that we are exposed to may not serve us very well. Of course, a certain way of reading is important. Sandōkai was not initially written as a document to be published for the general public. Once a monastic in the Chan tradition achieved a certain level of acknowledgement by the teacher, as part of the transmission document, they were allowed to copy it. In modern times, it is memorised and chanted as part of the daily service dedication to the lineage starting from the previous buddhas and Gautama Buddha all the way through to the succession of the lineage.

Sandōkai—Harmony of Difference and Equality

The mind of the great sage of India
is intimately transmitted from west to east.
While human faculties are sharp or dull,
the way has no Northern or Southern Ancestors.
The spiritual source shines clear in the light;
the branching streams flow on in the dark.
Grasping at things is surely delusion;
according with sameness is still not enlightenment.
All the objects of the senses
interact and yet do not.
Interacting brings involvement.
Otherwise, each keeps its place.
Sights vary in quality and form,
sounds differ as pleasing or harsh.
Refined and common speech come together in the dark,
clear and murky phrases are distinguished in the light.
The four elements return to their natures,
just as a child turns to its mother.
Fire heats, wind moves,
water wets, earth is solid.
Eye and sight, ear and sound,
nose and smell, tongue and taste.
Thus for each and every thing,
depending on these roots, the leaves spread forth.
Trunk and branches share the essence;
revered and common, each has its speech.
In the light there is darkness.
but don't take it as darkness;

In the dark there is light,
but don't see it as light.
Light and dark oppose one another
like the front and back foot in walking.
Each of the myriad things has its merit,
expressed according to function and place.
Phenomena exist, like box and lid joining;
principle accords, like arrow points meeting.
Hearing the words, understand the meaning;
don't set up standards of your own.
If you don't understand the way right before you,
how will you know the path as you walk?
Practice is not a matter of far or near,
but if you are confused, mountains and rivers block
your way.
I respectfully urge you who study the mystery,
don't pass your days and nights in vain.¹

Nothing happens by itself

There is always a preceding condition which gives rise to unique ways of expressing or representing the Buddhadharma or the Awakened One's truth; ways of expressing based on the location, time, culture, and environment. There are multiple or innumerable ways of expressing the Buddhadharma. Buddhism is not equality in the sense of democracy, where everything is the same. It is unique but based on the same roots or soil. That is the richness of the Buddhist tradition. In other words, you are okay as you are. As you are, you are buddha—a kind of buddha. Perhaps that buddha may be covered in mud, so you don't see the clean expression of the Buddha. Nonetheless, everyone is buddha.

Cultivation means walking the path of the Buddha, the Buddha Way. A buddha is an enlightened person, one who emulates enlightened ways. Walking that path, you become clearer and clearer. Gautama Buddha and the ancestors or forbearers of the lineage-tradition point to that target or goal, that direction. That's all. Everyone walks the path in reference to that target. A very ready person does not deviate. That person is ripened with meritorious deeds that have been accumulated—we don't need to necessarily talk about Buddhist practices but that person is living honestly, genuinely, and sincerely. They can refrain from unnecessary things and direct themselves back to the path. That is the Buddha's path. Once it starts, it is excellent each step of the way. It fulfils your life and meaning is there. You are not wasting the precious life that you have been given.

A human life is the life that is lived between birth and death. You don't want to waste this limited life. The average person will live eighty years or so. If you waste this time, you are not fully living each step of the way on the Buddha's path. Each person's responsibility is to choose the path that will fulfil the meaning of their life. The Buddha and lineage holders are guiding us, encouraging us to walk. People deviate due to preconditions, let's call them karmic conditions. If they realise this, they may ask for some guidance, some means of redirecting themselves to eventually pursue the path. This is called skilful means. This depends on how heavy your karmic habits are. We can simply call karmic habits, bad habits.

In Buddhism, to live life is not a big deal. To live life well is the concern of the Buddha, to live well in every moment. The way to walk that path is the fundamental practice of practice enlightenment: zazen or seated meditation. There is very little fabrication or artificiality. You simply sit, where you are, as you are. That is where buddha is—no other place. This buddha may be very busy with thoughts, that is all. This buddha may be a comfortable buddha, that is all. Reality reveals itself in that way, without distraction.

When you suffer, you suffer. If you cannot cope, you can take some medication. If you cannot do it by yourself, then you can go to a specialist

for medical or specialist psychological help. This is a temporary solution. When the challenge is too great and you cannot resume your life, you can ask for professional help as a means to cross over to the other shore. Once you have crossed over, you can return to the path. Path is called *margā* in Sanskrit. This is what the Buddha encouraged.

The way to bring Dharma joy or *hoetsu* to yourself is to look after your fundamental self-care. You harmonise the quality of your breath, the quality of your body, and the quality of the activity of your mind-consciousness. This is what is called Buddha's sitting. You allow your mind, breath, and body to function as they are. A pure quality must come. When necessary, self-care can be used as skilful-means. When it is not necessary, you can just take it away. We usually operate on a habitual basis through discrimination, separation, ego, self-attachment, and grasping. If your meditation is based on the idea of gain, it has nothing to do with the Buddha's path. You are actually then blocking it. You demonstrate the Buddha's way by simply sitting. You tap into the quality of ease. That is where it is. We may be busy with something such as being caught up in our day-to-day activity, but that space, that quality of ease is not lost. You realise this when you stop. Stopping is important. It is the way to resume this place of ease. Being still can do that and this is called *shamatha*. Based on shamatha, *vipassana* can come, and you experience insight and clear reflection on where you are as a kind of buddha.

Normally, there may be a lot of taint present. Complete wakefulness is like a clear mirror without stain. The mirror itself has no function; it just reflects. However, if there is a stain or some kind of idea, the mirror cannot reflect. Particular likes and dislikes warp the surface of the mirror and the reflection becomes biased and distorted. Being without fabrication and being just as you are is the Buddha. Even fabricated, you are no different from Buddha. That is the way of cultivation. Even while walking the path, from time to time, we do become distracted. This is why you return and pay homage to the place that gives you ease. That is the practice of sitting.

Sitting is hard work! You can put up with that. If you like it, you will do it. I'm not impressed when people say that they have sat in meditation for ten or twenty periods each day at a retreat. Normally, people do the things that they like. This is nothing special. Just settling yourself where you are is the Buddha Way; it is cultivation, day after day. By doing so, you bring the balanced state. Before meeting the Buddhadharma, we are upside down; we need to be saved, to be brought right side up. Because we operate based on discriminative consciousness, dualistic thinking, we pick and choose, we accept something we like and reject something we don't like, and we compare things as right or wrong. We even compare external elements such as other people and internally, we compare our memories of yesterday and today. This kind of way, based on so-called experience, is a memory stored in the brain and it is not an accurate impression. Based on picking and choosing, we store something convenient, something we like. We reject something we don't like. From the beginning, if there is something that we don't like, it is like it doesn't exist. We don't pay attention to it. Ignorance is a part of the human existence, and the wise person is aware of that part. We really don't know the truth. Socrates knew that there is nothing definite, but it didn't mean he could stop his enquiry into that. What you are seeking through Buddhism determines which path you are walking. I hope that the Buddhist students are walking the Buddha's path, the enquiry into the nature of the self and reality. And in order to do that, readiness is important. Cultivation of the soil is important and so is not becoming too rigid about things. The more particular you are, the more limited you become. You have fewer friends.

One quality of the mind of the great sage of India was a kind heart. From a humanistic view, he had a very warm heart towards humanity. He saw the problems and tried to address them. Much of the teaching that he spent his whole life on was on skilful means, or providing some means to cross over challenges. Challenge comes in two ways: individual challenge and collective, societal or environmental challenge. I call this, Buddha's warm

heart. Traditionally, we call it the compassion of the Buddha or the wisdom of the Buddha. You can say it in many different ways, but it is about the human condition. The Buddha had no intention of creating “Buddhism,” he just wanted people to live life well with non-discrimination. All manner of people, Hindu people, indigenous people, and his followers, from each part of society, joined him and he accepted them all without discrimination. It is not about segregating Buddhists and non-Buddhists. They are absolutely equal. Absolute equality is the fundamental basis of being human. Even when cultural difference is there, if you go deep into it, it is not different. It is conditioning which makes us different.

Sandōkai has this meaning. The heart and mind of Buddha is intimately transmitted to the West and East, India and China. That gave rise to Chan Buddhism in the rich soil of China. The cultural atmosphere was that of collectiveness—nature-centred but with human participation. The individual aspect played a smaller role. Even today, you can see how Chinese culture operates—it does so autocratically. There is group mentality. You cannot compare it with the West in a true sense because here, Confucian values come in. It would also be good if Taoist values came in more strongly because things would soften a little bit; it would have a non-gaining, non-deliberate aspect. It would involve just being your own self. Normally, we tend to go one way or another. There is a middle path, an enlightened path, and it is the centre as the integration of two aspects. The Sandōkai is three in one, the kinship of three. “Three in one” means that your unique individuality is not separate from the collective. Your happiness is not separate from your partner’s happiness. Your happiness is not separate from the environment. That is the kinship of three.²

This kind of thinking is not here in the West because very little emphasis is put on an examination of the self. Rather, it is all about concepts and ideas, labelling and creating boundaries by defining things and turning things into objects. Science is wonderful because it gives us an objective way of looking at things, but it is a thing. It is not the answer; it provides tools to

help us and guide us when necessary. It is like an umbrella, it is necessary when you have heavy rain, or like a crutch when you cannot walk. It has a supportive role that ultimately guides us in a certain direction or in each step of the way in order for us to live well.

You can fulfil your life moment to moment as much as possible. That is walking the eight-fold path. Being able to do that is right wisdom. Having insight is the correct view we need in order to walk the path. It is a very simple thing but sometimes one's own conditioning gets in the way. If you really fight against it instead of clearly seeing it, sitting with it, and becoming clear about it, then there is no choice. Something blocks us from passing. That itself is a springboard to the overcoming. But that is not the way we are told about things. We accumulate something we like and eliminate other things we do not like. We are raised like that. We are told that if you study hard and get a good education, you will have an easy and happy life. I don't think this proves true. We need to shine a light onto the nature of things. Whichever way it goes, there is no escape. But "no escape" means to get wonderful good news. Because of that problem, we have an opportunity to fulfil our lives.

Notes

1. Suzuki, Shunryu. *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness: Zen Talks on the Sandokai*. United Kingdom: University of California Press, 2001.
2. The title "Sandōkai" is also the same title of an earlier text by a Taoist influenced author from the second century BC. Zen Master Sekitō Kisen used the same title later on, approximately during the eighth or ninth century. Sekitō Kisen was an eighth century Zen master so the same title of the document was there from a Taoist source. That title is often translated as, "The Kinship of the Three," or the "Identity of the Three." Actually, this better expresses the meaning of Sandōkai. Three is absolutely equal. "San" literally means three in Japanese; "ichi," "ni," "san," or one, two, three. Sandōkai—identity of the three. our body, breath, and

consciousness are one—identity of three. If you say body, it is identical to breath. If you say body, it is identical to your mind. If you say breath, it is identical to your body and your mind. If you say mind, it is identical to your body and breath. This is a complete form of life. It has that kind of meaning. “San” is a very important number. The identity of three is like “Buddhadharma,” or the “triple treasures.” It is the same. When you say Buddhadharma, Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha are actually one. There is the identity, the kinship of the three. This way of relating is not often taught—there is the Buddha there, the Dharma there, and the Sangha there and we need to study one by one. However, there is no Buddha if there is no Sangha. There’s no Dharma if there is no Sangha. This kind of thinking is very important. Sandōkai pinpoints truth, Buddha’s truth or universal truth in a new way of presenting it that requires a certain transformation on the part of the recipient. If you are coming with your own preconceived ideas and habits, it just blocks one from becoming familiar with the mind of the Buddha, or heart and mind of the Buddha, which means the heart and mind of your own true self.