

## PUBLIC ZEN, PERSONAL ZEN

The historical context of the emergence of Zen:

1] The arrival of Buddhism in 6<sup>th</sup> century Japan was explicitly connected with the state-building aspirations of various clans (*uji*) who embraced the Eurasian Buddhist imaginary of hierarchic and functionally-organized imperial rule.

- initial appeal: ritual efficacy of Buddhist images
- this led to a symbiotic relationship among Buddhist and state institutions as sites for the accumulation and hereditary transmission of wealth and power

2] Some 200 years after the initial introduction of Buddhism to Japan, Tendai and Shingon are articulated to address the power struggles afflicting Nara Buddhist institutions and to realize the promise of Buddhism as a “total care” system for personal, social and political flourishing.

- an emphasis on practice rather than scholarship, especially esoteric (*mikkyō*) rituals/texts
  - Saichō: Buddha-nature is not something to accept on faith, but to realize in practice
    - enlightenment can be realized by everyone, “in this very body” (*sokushin jōbutsu*)
  - Kūkai: the advanced Buddhist ritual technology for realizing enlightenment “in this very body” also harmonizes and protects the state
    - ritual is not a *means-to* instrumental ends; rituals enact the *meaning-of* enlightened presence

Tendai and Shingon were, however, fairly quickly drawn into the fractiousness of elite struggles in the overlapping domains of monastic, aristocratic and royal power.

3] Alongside these elite developments, Buddhism took root in the lives of commoners.

- Gyōki (668-749) and the emphasis on Buddhism as a force for “social activism”
- widespread embrace of a Buddhist vision of a karmic cosmos paired with convictions that *mappō* or the era of the decline of the Dharma had begun
  - skepticism about *jiriki* (self-power) and need for *tariki* (other-power)
  - Kuyā (903-972), Jōdo-shū (Pure Land), Jōdo-shin-shū (True Pure Land), Nichiren

### The Emergence of Japanese Zen

Zen generally regarded as a form of “Kamakura Buddhism,” but Chan meditation techniques and teachings found their way to Japan by the 8<sup>th</sup> century and even came to the attention of Emperor Saga and Empress Danrin early 9<sup>th</sup> century. But these early introductions had little or no impact.

- “chan” = *dhyana* or meditation and used in all Buddhist schools

More importantly, Japan sent its last official mission to China in 838 and formally cut off relations with the Tang in 894. It was not until the mid-12<sup>th</sup> century that Japanese monks resumed travel to China and found a very different Buddhist landscape dominated by Chan “public monasteries”—the so-called “Five Mountains and Ten Temples” system supported by the Song state. Two main lineages:

- Linji Chan: Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163) held sitting meditation as basic, but only effective for most people if supplemented with *kanhua* “or key phrase” meditation based on *gongan* (J: *kōan*) literature of “encounter dialogues” of masters and students
- Caodong Chan: Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157) used *gongan* practice, but stressed “just sitting” (J: *shikantaza*)

For 12<sup>th</sup> century Japanese monks, the economic and cultural vibrancy of Song China was testament to the success of Chan.

The first attempt to launch Chan practice in Japan was undertaken by Dainichi Nōnin (n.d.) who read Chan texts brought back by Japanese monks along with reports on Chan practice in 1180s.

- founds Darumashū or the “Bodhidharma lineage” in Japan
- denounced by Tendai and early proponents of Chan/Zen—Eisai and Dōgen

### ***Rinzai Zen***

Tradition attributes the founding of Rinzai Zen to Myōan Eisai (1141-1215), who made two visits to Song China in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.

- blended Chinese Chan, Tendai esotericism, and strict monastic discipline
- aimed at bringing Chan meditative and institutional approaches and insights to Japan in ways suited to transforming Japanese Buddhism from within
  - a way for samurai to acquire more than just military legitimacy
- syncretism continues, with Enni Be'nen (1202-1280) playing a role in getting sufficient support from court elites to build a Zen temple complex, Tōfukuji.

A turning point: Mongol invasions of China → stream of immigrant Chinese Chan masters who become well-connected with samurai elites, including the regent to the Kamakura shogun, Hōjō Tokiyori (1227-1263) who studied with Linji Chan master Lanqi Daolong (1213-1278)

- as in Song China, Zen’s role one of complementing/safeguarding secular norms
- in 1274 Mongol forces invade Japan and seem set to overpower Japanese defenses until the regent, Hōjō Tokimune (1251-1284), sits *zazen* and steels his resolve

In 1299, Chan master Yishan Yining (1247-1317) sent as emissary of the Mongol Yuan dynasty and becomes abbot at leading monasteries in (samurai) Kamakura and (imperial) Kyōto

- highly skilled in the most current, elite Chinese literary and artistic practices, Yishan was the embodiment of combined spiritual intensity and cultural refinement

One of Yishan’s students, Musō Soseki (1275-1351), became teacher to the two brothers who shared rule of the new Ashikaga shogunate and orchestrated the development of the *gozan* or “five mountains” system of officially-sponsored Zen monasteries, based on Song Chinese model.

- monasteries as sources protective power: repositories of religious and political capital
  - *gozan* system eventually paired 5 leading monasteries and 10 lower level temples in Kyōto and Kamakura, with a national system of smaller institutions below them
- Musō consolidated association of Zen and the arts

Some Rinzai monks rejected the social and political complications of metropolitan monasteries.

- for some: a reclusive life of practicing *zazen* and *kōan* study in remote mountain temples; for others: communal life centered on daily group meditation practice and shared labor
- *rinka* or “below the grove” monasteries vs the *gozan* “grove”
  - focus on communal *zazen* and the embrace of rustic simplicity as a quality of day-to-day life devoted to awakening to one’s true nature (*kenshō*)

Zen flourished throughout the Muromachi period→several thousand monasteries and temples in the *gozan* system and a similar number of *rinka* temples. But the splintering of power groups and sponsorship regimes eventually led to a loss of Rinzai vitality.

- important transition with Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) and the Tokugawa shogunate’s view of Europeans/Christianity as a political and cultural threat
  - restrictions on both the trading and missionary activities→closure of Japan in 1635
  - family registry system obliged every Japanese family to be Buddhist temple members

Major proponent of reform: Takuan Sōhō (1573-1645), once banished to far north for objecting to Tokugawa policies on religious affairs, but later favored by Tokugawa Iemitsu (1604-1651).

- Drawing on his own martial arts training, Takuan spoke a language that samurai would understand: formal discipline and training→breaking through mental and physical habits

Another “countercultural” voice: Bankei Yōtaku (1622-1693) who argued that Rinzai had become too immersed in personally-gratifying but socially-unproductive aesthetic pursuits.

- radical de-conditioning aimed at realizing the “unborn” (*mushō*)—one’s own mind or nature prior to imprinting by social, cultural, intellectual and emotional customs/habits

Full Rinzai reforms led by Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1768) based on daily labor and meditation, extensive meditation retreats (*sesshin*), and one-to-one interviews between master and student.

- reinvigorated *kōan* study as method for lay/monastic practitioners: “red hot ball of iron”

### ***Sōtō Zen***

Sōtō usually traced to founder: Dōgen Kigen (1200-1253), a lineage holder both in Eisai’s Rinzai/Linji line and in the Chinese tradition of Caodong Chan.

- Dōgen espoused a “pure” Zen rooted in the primacy of *zazen*, regular public Dharma talks, private interviews with students, communal labor, and strict monastic discipline
- practicing *zazen* is not sitting to *become* a Buddha, it is sitting *as* a Buddha

After ten years teaching in Kyōto, Dōgen moved his community in 1243 to the mountains of Echizen on an isolated stretch of coast along the Sea of Japan

- effectively cut off significant sponsorship from aristocratic or warrior elites in Kyōto and Kamakura→reliance on rural warrior families and villagers for support
- his community renowned as a source of spiritual and material power—a “field of merit”

Keizan Jōkin (1268-1325), a “third generation” disciple reframed the institutional trajectory of Sōtō: the “mother” of Sōtō, second in prestige only to the “father” figure, Dōgen.

- while he continued to valorize *kōan* and *zazen* training, Keizan also brought other Buddhist practices into the lives of the monastic and lay communities

This model of Zen practice proved to be very powerful and Keizan's Sōtō lineage rapidly spread across Japan, putting down deep root in towns, villages and remoter rural areas. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century = a multi-branched system of several thousand temples. Key to spread:

- charismatic presence via ascetic vigor and strict meditation practice
- funeral rites to ritually assist loved ones toward freedom from suffering
- ritual propitiations of local spirits (*kami*) from within Buddhist framework

The Japanese countryside in the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries was troubled by continuous conflicts among “warring states barons” (*sengoku daimyō*) and although much of the support for Sōtō temples came from commoners, security required the favor of regionally powerful warriors.

- temples aligned with ascendant *daimyō* → both opportunities and imperatives to establish branch temples in newly acquired territories
- intensifying succession disputes in expansive hierarchies of head and branch temples that took the form of nested pyramids of prestige and influence

Sōtō Zen materially secured by Tokugawa household registration system: by mid-Tokugawa period: more than 17,500 Sōtō temples, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Sōtō Zen system was the largest religious institution in Japan

Also as in Rinzaï, many Sōtō leaders felt that this material prosperity came at the cost of spiritual authenticity. Among them, Tenkei Denson (1648-1735) was among the most outspoken.

- for Tankei everyone has a mind of enlightenment that is waiting only to be unveiled

### **Practicing Zen: The Interdependence of the Public and the Personal**

From its origins Chan/Zen presented itself as a restoration of the Buddhist path in response to deteriorating material, moral and spiritual conditions.

- Zen insisted that it was possible to replicate—and not just refer to or revere—the Buddha's enlightening expression of boundless wisdom and compassion.

As Dōgen explained in his *Shōbōgenzō*, the Zen path of practice is best cleared collaboratively when master and student “practice together personally,” moving forward “shoulder-to-shoulder,” slicing through *kattō* (or the entangling vines of karma) with *kattō*, using whatever karmic tools are ready to hand to craft an enlightening relationship.

Zen training emphasis on narratives offering insight into the distinctive ways in which great masters/teachers have personified Zen: *koan* or “public cases” of enlightening relationality.

### **Dōgen Kigen, 1200-1253: The Religious Virtuoso and Philosopher**

Dōgen renowned for fierce confidence in “practice as verification” or the “equivalence of practice and realization” (*shushō ittō*), and forceful insistence on the *immediacy* of awakening

- goes “on the road” seeking spiritual authenticity, takes up Zen and goes to China with Eisai's dharma heir, ending up stuck in port in China due to a “visa” problem
  - once in China, he eventually meets Caodong master Tiantong Rujing (1163-1228)

- *zazen* as “sloughing off ‘body’ and ‘mind’”

In “Instructions to the Temple Cook” (*Tenzo Kyokun*), Dōgen says that the true meaning of enlightenment with this very body is that “the mind that finds the Way actualizes itself through working with sleeves rolled up.”

- dropping off body and mind is *not* a transcendence of or indifference to the world; it is an intentional attitude—a *way* of being present

In *Bendōwa*: “Just drop off body and mind in the practice of *zazen*; if even once you sit up straight in attentive virtuosity (*samadhi*), imprinting the Buddha-seal in your bodily, verbal and mental activities, each and every thing in the cosmos becomes the Buddha-seal and all space without exception is enlightenment.”

Dōgen openly endorsed the possibility of successfully undertaking practice-realization in the midst of the world of desires. But he was also well aware of the principle expressed by the Chan adage that “the more mud, the bigger the Buddha.” His monastic community at Eihei-ji was his attempt to bring together enough dedicated monks capable of sitting continuously *as* Buddhas to respond to the enormity of the “mud” in which Japanese society was mired at the time.

### **Ikkyū Sōjun**, 1394-1481: The Social Critic and Iconoclast

Ikkyū was born during a period when great advances were being made in culture and the arts, but in which tensions mounted among warrior elites and between the Northern and Southern Courts of the divided imperial family.

In turn dismayed and angered by what he saw as the decadent aestheticism and almost fetishistic desire for power that shaped life in both *gozan* and *rinka* temples, Ikkyū came to feel a special kinship with Linji iconoclasm and joins community of Kasō (1352-1428) → two awakenings

- first: while listening to a minstrel singing about two court ladies who become nuns
- second: while meditating in a fishing boat adrift on the starlit waters of Lake Biwa

Ikkyū left Kasō’s community in 1426: itinerant lifestyle for the next 50 years, favoring market towns mixing with hereditary elites, merchants, artists, performers, actors and other “marginals” or *kawaramono* (literally “riverbed riffraff”)

- a self-described “crazy cloud,” Ikkyū’s Zen merged “mornings in the mountains” (ascetic Zen) with “nights on the town” (unbound Zen).
  - after ten days as abbot of a Daitoku-ji sub-temple: “Ten days as abbot and my mind is reeling, beneath my feet a ‘red thread’ stretching interminably. If you come looking for me another day, try a fish shop, tavern, or a brothel.”

Ikkyū’s poetry collected by students upon his death: the *Kyōunshū* or Crazy Cloud Anthology. The difficulty of translating these is illustrated in #45. In the prose introduction Yunmen poses a question to his students: “The old Buddhas and the bare pillar unite; what kind of subtle activity is this?” but answers himself: “On the south mountain, clouds rising; on the north mountain, falling rain.”

- Ikkyū’s poem: “How did Little Bride consort with Master Peng? In a dream tonight: clouds and rain. At dawn, I’m at Tiantai; at dusk, at Nanyue. Not knowing, where to meet Shaoyang.”

At one level, Ikkyū insists that consummating the marriage of wisdom and compassion is possible only *within* the world of human experience, making real the bodhisattva ideal of appreciative and contributory virtuosity.

- “what you can do depends on your situation; your situation depends on what you can do”

Nevertheless, a strong believer in karma: "Students who ignore karma are sunk: This single sentence of an old Chan master is worth a thousand pieces of gold: 'As for evil, don't do it; as for the good, practice sharing it'. Must have been something sung by a drunken gentleman." (K 250)

- in his prose introduction: Bo Juyi (poet) asks Niaokou (Chan master)
- then quotes Zen master Ryozen (1295-1369)

In his last years of life, in the midst of the chaos of the Ōnin War, Ikkyū fell in love with a blind singer, Mori—a beautiful woman almost half a century his junior—and shared an intimacy with her that was in turns delicately thoughtful, lusty, and spiritually-elevated.

### **Ryōkan Taigu, 1758-1831: The Gentle and Poetic Country “Fool”**

Ryōkan spent most of his life outside of institutional Zen, known for his poetry and calligraphy, and his personification of a gently quiet Zen.

- personal inspiration from Jōfukyō or “Never-Disparaging”—a bodhisattva-monk to whom the twentieth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* is devoted.

Ryōkan embarked on the path of an *unsui* or “cloud-water” monk at 32 and never abandoned it until he was too old to continue. He once compared himself once to a stream, “making its way through mossy crevices, quietly turning clear,” and described his likely personal legacy as just “flowers in spring, cuckoos in summer, and maple leaves in fall.”

Speaking little was part of Ryōkan’s commitment to listening well. “Before listening to the [Buddhist] way, do not fail to wash your ears. Otherwise it will be impossible to listen clearly. What is washing your ears? Do not hold onto your view. If you cling to it even a little bit, you will lose your way... Seeking answers with closed ears is like trying to touch the ocean bottom with a pole.”

Later in life, when too old to do the alms round, he moved into the garden shed of a lay student and came to know a young nun, Teishan.

- over Ryōkan’s final years, they developed a deep and intimate mutual appreciation
  - writing of their relationship: “Chanting old poems, making our own verses, playing *temari* together in the fields—two people, one heart.”
  - another time, he writes: “The breeze is fresh, the moon so bright—let’s dance together until dawn as a farewell to my old age.”