

The Ancestral Line

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Every morning, as is the practice in all Sōtō Zen temples, we recite the names of the Buddhas and Ancestors through whom the Truth has been passed down to us.¹ Dōgen Zenji says:

In order to actualize the Buddhas and Patriarchs it is necessary to chant their names and make prostrations before them. All the Buddhas and Patriarchs of past, present and future, from time immemorial chant and make prostrations before all the others.²

Our purpose in undertaking training is to make the teaching of the Buddhas and Ancestors one with ourselves. The teaching we receive comes to us through the generations of priests back to the time of Shakyamuni Buddha and beyond. Because of the generosity of these eighty or so generations, we have the opportunity today to hear the teaching of Shakyamuni and meet him face to face. To *actualize the Buddhas and Patriarchs* means that we become one of them. Through the power of training and the compassion of the Buddhas we understand what they understand and exhibit this understanding in daily life. Religious understanding begins with gratitude and so we make a point each morning of offering the merit of the recitation of scriptures to those who gave up everything and became a vehicle for the truth. Because of their training we have the possibility of transcending our karma and realizing enlightenment. There is no greater gift than this and so it is natural that we offer our gratitude.

The further training develops the clearer it becomes that there is no room for selfishness. A Buddha or an Ancestor is different from an ordinary person in that they are willing to continually let go of self and allow the compassion of the Buddhas to flow through them. That flow is obstructed if the trainee comes to believe that it is by *his* power or through *his* greatness that the Buddha's glory is shown to the world; in other words, if pride enters in and they forget that it is not them but the Buddhas and Ancestors acting through them that makes a monastery, temple or meditation group possible.

The Master-disciple relationship is central to the spread of Zen Buddhism, and the recognition that there will always be Buddhas and Ancestors senior to you and worthy of your respect is how the Teaching is kept pure. Our true place is within the circle of the Buddhas and Ancestors where all are willing to let go of self so that they can realize Buddha nature. When we make prostrations to the Buddhas and Ancestors we are not bowing to some ideal that we can never reach. We are actualizing the Buddhas and Ancestors by returning to our true place.

The Ancestral Line begins with the names of the Seven Buddhas, starting with Bibashibutsu Daioshō down to the historical Buddha, Shakyamunibutsu Daioshō. The suffix butsu means Buddha and the word Daioshō that follows each name means Great Priest. The Seven Buddhas are the Buddhas of this world, the first six being those who taught Shakyamuni. Collectively they can be considered as the endless succession of Buddhas of past, present, and future, and as representative of that which teaches beyond the world of appearances. Following Shakyamunibutsu is the list of those who became Shakyamuni and passed on the teaching, down to Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett. Her name was added to the list after her death in 1996.

When reading about the Ancestors from other sources, do not be surprised if they are referred to by different names. This is because the Japanese and Chinese pronunciation of a person's name differs widely although they are written in the same characters, and the translation into English makes them appear totally different. Also, it is a custom to often refer to a priest by the name of his or her temple rather than by their personal name. For example, Wu-pen-ta-shih (Jap. Gohen-Daishi.) was the priest at Tung-shan (Jap. Tōzan) and so he was known as Tung-shan Liang-chieh in Chinese, or in Japanese, Tōzan Ryōkai. When reading sources that give the Chinese names of the Ancestors the situation is further complicated by the fact that there are two systems used for transliterating Chinese characters into English so Tung-shan Liang-chieh may appear as Dongshan Liangjie!

There are three groupings in the list; the first twenty-eight after Shakyamunibutsu and ending with Bodhidharma were the Ancestors in India; they are followed by the twenty-two Chinese Ancestors down to Tendō Nyōjō, Dōgen's Master; the final group is from Eihei (Kōsō) Dōgen, who was the first Ancestor in Japan, down to Hōun Jiyū Daiōshō. The list of Ancestors will not only be different for each school of Buddhism but for each Master as well. Every time a master has a disciple, who in turn has a disciple of their own, the family tree grows. In Sōji temple in Japan they only recite the Ancestral Line as far as Keizan Jōkin, the founder of that temple, as after that the lines diverge depending on the particular lineage of the individual monk.

Within the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives we teach Buddhism with the particular approach and flavor of Keidō Chisan Daiōshō and Hōun Jiyū Daiōshō. As time goes by, each Master develops his own way of teaching based on the teaching methods of his own Master. In this way, Buddhism has been kept alive and fresh.

It is beyond the scope of this article to give details of all the Ancestors but the *Denkōroku*³ by Keizan Zenji gives an account of the Ancestors as far as Kōun Ejyō Daiōshō, the first disciple of the great master Dōgen. Our list of Ancestors includes Nagyaarajyuna (Nagajuna) back to whom at least eight different schools trace their lineage, and Bodhidharma, the twenty-eighth Indian and first Chinese Ancestor who brought Zen to China. His particular style of teaching, as passed on through the succeeding Ancestors, became known as the Zen school. The sixth Chinese Ancestor, Daikan Enō (Hui Neng) is famous for having received the Transmission at midnight while still a layman. He was illiterate and poor and yet under his leadership the Zen school began to flourish and develop. Sekitō Kisen, Enō's grand-disciple, wrote the *Sandōkai*, and Tōzan Ryōkai along with Sōzan, developed his teaching into what later became known as the Sōtō school. The culmination of the development of Sōtō Zen was the work of Eihei Dōgen who brought Sōtō Zen to Japan. His major work - the *Shōbōgenzō* - is a masterpiece of religious thought. Through the foundation provided by Dōgen, and three generations later the genius of Keizan Jōkin, Sōtō Zen became one of the largest schools of Buddhism in Japan. In the seventeenth century Manzan Dōhaku was a vitalizing and reforming personality who founded one of the two major lines through which priests today trace their ancestry. Keidō Chisan wrote several important works on the history of Zen. He was the Chief Abbot of Saijōji, and later Chief Abbot of Dai Hon Zan Sōjiji, one of the two principle training monasteries of the Sōtō school in Japan.

While historical data on the Ancestors is useful and can teach us a great deal, the most important point is that we come to know the Buddhas and Ancestors by meeting them face to face. We do this through our sincerity of purpose and dedicated effort in training that will lead us to share in the same realization with them.

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Notes

1. See *Zen is Eternal Life*, p. 284.
2. Dōgen Zenji, *Shōbōgenzō*[The Eye and Treasury of the True Law], trans. Kosen Nishiyama & John Stevens (Tokyo: Nakayama Shobo, 1977), Volume 1, p. 100.
3. *The Denkōroku - The Record of The Transmission Of The Light* by Keizan Zenji, trans Rev. Herbert Nearman. Shasta Abbey Press 1993.