

Introduction to the Shinji Shobogenzo

Shobogenzo means “The Right-Dharma-Eye Treasury.” *Shinji* means “original (or true) characters,” which refers here to the Chinese characters that compose the book. The Shinji Shobogenzo is variously known as the “*Shobogenzo Sanbyakusoku*” (Three Hundred Verse Shobogenzo) and the “*Mana Shobogenzo*” (“*mana*” being an alternative reading of “*shinji*”). It is a collection of three hundred and one Chinese *mondo*, (questions and answers, discussions), commonly called *koans*, stories describing the conversations and actions of ancient Buddhist masters.

Compiled in the 13th century by Master Dogen, the founder of the Soto Sect of Buddhism and one of the most brilliant philosophers in Japanese history, the three hundred koans are divided into three sections or “books,” two containing one hundred koans each, and the third containing one hundred and one koans. The Shinji Shobogenzo was originally titled simply “*Shobogenzo*,” the same as Master Dogen’s monumental work in Japanese. It seems that “*Shinji*” was added later, probably in order to distinguish the two works.

The origins of the Shinji Shobogenzo are obscure, and remain the subject of scholastic research. For centuries the authorship of the Shinji Shobogenzo was disputed, and in fact, until 1934, the only available version was an Edo period commentary from around the mid-1700s, *Nentei Sanbyakusoku Funogo*, by Master Shigetsu Ein. Then, in 1934, an important discovery was made at Kanazawa Bunko, an archive of medieval documents in Kanagawa. A copy of one of the three books of the Shinji Shobogenzo was found, dated 1288, thereby proving the existence of the book not long after Master Dogen’s death in 1253. Also, the stories themselves bear great resemblance to their quotations in Master Dogen’s Japanese Shobogenzo.

Today most Buddhist scholars agree that the book was written by Master Dogen. Its date of compilation is still disputed but there is a strong case for believing that it was at least begun by Master Dogen when he was studying at Kenninji Temple, near Kyoto, before he made his voyage to China, perhaps as reference material for his studies.

There are a number of differing views, both concerning the links between the Sung dynasty texts in which these stories are originally collected (including *Keitoku Dentoroku*, *Shumon Toyoshu*, *Engo Goroku*, *Wanshi Goroku*, etc.) and also regarding the nature of the relationship between Master Dogen’s two *Shobogenzo* texts. However, it seems clear that he used his collection of koans as source material for both his lectures and his writings. While in the Shinji

Shobogenzo Master Dogen recorded these koans without comments, in his masterwork, the Shobogenzo in Japanese, and in the record of his lectures, *Eihei Koroku*, Master Dogen makes constant reference to many of the stories, commenting on them, interpreting them, even deconstructing and reconstructing them to suit his own didactic purposes. For a detailed and learned comparative discussion of the two Shobogenzo texts, together with a useful index of the appearance of the koan stories in Master Dogen's works, the reader is referred to *Dogen and the Koan Tradition – A Tale of Two Shobogenzo Texts*, by Steven Heine, published by the State University of New York Press, 1994.

It is significant to note that Master Dogen referred to these *mondo* as *kosoku* (ancestral criteria) or *innen* (cause or result, and circumstances, a story) – he did not refer to them as *koans*. Master Dogen used the word *koan* to mean Dharma or the Universe that we are living in, as in Shobogenzo *Genjo-koan* (*The Realized Universe*), an entirely different usage from its meaning as used in the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism. In his writing and talks, he uses the stories that he collected to examine and explain Buddhist teachings and the Buddhist system of logic. However, it is important to emphasize that nowhere in his works does he recommend that these *koan* stories be used as part of Zazen practice.

Notes on the Translation

Nishijima Roshi published a complete Japanese translation of the Shinji Shobogenzo from the Chinese around 1985, and has continued to lecture and publish detailed commentaries on them since that time.

He started dictating an English translation and commentaries on the stories to Larry Zacchi, Michael Luetchford, and Mike Cross soon after this, but it was not until 1989 that the first one hundred stories were edited and a limited number of copies of *Shinji Shobogenzo, Book One* were printed. The project was then put on hold for nearly ten years, as we became involved in the translation and publication of the four main Shobogenzo volumes.

This present publication is based on those original dictations. A lot of additional work has been done in checking the content against Nishijima Roshi's detailed commentaries in Japanese, and clarifying the meanings of the stories with him. Japanese readings have been used throughout for the names of Chinese masters, temples, and places, and Sanskrit terms have been rendered simply without diacriticals.

Since the original stories are written in Chinese, context plays an important role in the translation. We have often referred to *Master Dogen's Shobogenzo* (Nishijima & Cross, in four volumes, Windbell Publications) in refining the

translation of these stories, since he comments on many of the stories in great detail. However, we have adopted a more interpretive style in this book, compared with the more literal translation approach used in the *Shobogenzo*.

Our aim has always been to make the meaning of the stories clear. Although many have said that these koan stories can be used in some illogical way to break through the barrier of the intellect, Buddhist philosophy is not incomprehensible. The Buddha's teachings are always logical, and they can be understood following a logical system.

The Buddha acknowledged that there is an ineffable aspect to this world that cannot be grasped by logical enquiry, and one of the aims of Buddhist practice and study is to notice that there is an area that logic cannot grasp. However, up to that point, Buddhism has a very clear philosophical system, and that system is implicit in the structure of these stories.

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Shobogenzo and the Four Views

When I was eighteen, I found a book called the Shobogenzo. It was written in the thirteenth century by the founder of the sect of Buddhism in Japan which is based on the practice of Zazen. His name is Master Dogen. I found the Shobogenzo almost impossible to read at that time, and I was amazed that there could be a book written in my own language which I was unable to understand at all. But although I could not understand it, I had the feeling that the book might contain important and valuable things.

This was the start of what was to become forty years of study. And when at last I could understand the meaning of the Shobogenzo, it also became clear to me why I had found it so difficult for so long. The book itself is composed of many contradictory statements, and this made it appear illogical. But after reading and re-reading many times, I found that the Shobogenzo is in fact constructed in a very special way; using a unique pattern of expression.

Master Dogen expresses his ideas in the Shobogenzo based on a pattern of four phases. First, he explains a problem from the idealistic point of view; that is, as an idea using abstract concepts. Then, immediately after this first phase, he explains the same problem, but this time from the objective, or material point of view. In other words, he gives concrete examples and facts. Then, in the next phase, he explains the problem yet a third time as a real problem; that is, on the basis of action.

Of course, he cannot fully explain the reality surrounding the problem with words in a book, but he does so by bringing together the subjective viewpoint which he presents first, and the second objective viewpoint. He synthesizes the two viewpoints into a realistic appraisal of the problem based upon the philosophy of action, which states that in action, there is a synthesis of the self and the external world. And in the final phase, he tries to suggest the subtle ineffable nature of reality itself by using symbolic, poetic, or figurative forms of speech.

The Shobogenzo is full of these four-phased explanations. The chapters themselves fall into four groups: theoretical, objective, realistic, and figurative or poetic. The contents of the chapters are also divided in the same way, and even the content of individual paragraphs follows the same pattern. In general, a theoretical or subjective explanation and a materialistic or objective explanation of the same problem will always be contradictory. Again, a realistic explanation will seemingly be in contradiction to both the subjective and objective points of view. And the real situation itself is different again from the realistic explanation given.

When we first read the Shobogenzo, we are astounded by what appear to be gross contradictions in logic. This is one of the reasons why the book is so difficult to understand. It appears full of opposing ideas.

However, after I had read and re-read Master Dogen's book, I got used to this unique way of thinking about things. He discusses all problems from three points of view, subjective and theoretical, objective and material, and action/realistic. He then insists on the difference between his three viewpoints and the actual situation itself. Using this method, he is able to explain the reality of a situation very clearly and logically. He believes that the most important thing is to see what the reality itself is; and at the same time, he realizes how impossible this is using the medium of the written word.

So this unique pattern or logical system is Master Dogen's way of suggesting what reality is. And I believe that Master Dogen's method is in fact a very realistic way of explaining reality. I found that Master Dogen's ideas were very realistic, and I found too that Buddhism is a religion of reality.

The stories in the Shinji Shobogenzo also follow the same unique logical system, and if they are studied from the four viewpoints, we find that they are very realistic stories that were used to teach the fundamental principles of Buddhism. They contain nothing mystical or incomprehensible; they are the Buddhist Masters' way of pointing to reality.

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