

Sokushin Zebutsu: The Mind Itself is Buddha

Rev. Tairyu Tsunoda
Associate professor, Komazawa University

Sokushin zebutsu (the mind itself is Buddha), in addition to *shikantaza*, is one of the most important phrases in Soto Zen Buddhism. Realizing (*joto* in Japanese) *sokushin zebutsu* together with *shikantaza*, defines Sotoshu doctrine. They are its ultimate teaching.

These two terms are even emphasized in the *Sotoshu Shuken* (The Sotoshu Constitution). In Chapter One it states “Abiding by the True Dharma singularly transmitted by the Buddha-ancestors, the Sotoshu doctrine is to realize (*joto*) *shikantaza* (just sitting) and *sokushin zebutsu* (the mind itself is Buddha).”

In “*Gakudo Yojinshu*” (“Points to Watch in Practicing the Way”), *joto* is explained by Dogen Zenji as follows:

Joto (realizing) is to directly realize Buddhahood with this body-mind. In other words, it is not to change the former state of body-mind into some other special state but just to follow the realization of the other (one’s teacher). It is called *jikige* (right here) or *joto*.

The fundamental Sotoshu teaching is that of realizing Buddhahood through *shikantaza* and *sokushin zebutsu* in each moment. Therefore *sokushin zebutsu*, as well as *shikantaza*, is a very important term and a basic teaching for Soto Zen Buddhists.

The meaning of *sokushin zebutusu* in Zen tradition in general

In the customary Chinese usage of the phrase, “*soku A ze B*” means “A is B” or “A is exactly B.” On the other hand, to say “*soku A soku B*,” is to emphasize the sameness of A and B but not the identity of A with B.

So, the expression “*sokushin zebutsu*” originally means that the mind itself is actually Buddha. This phrase is highly important along with other famous Chinese Zen phrases, such as “Not relying on words and letters.” “Teachings are transmitted outside the Scriptures.” “Pointing directly to one’s mind.” “Seeing into one’s own nature and attaining Buddhahood.” and “Mind to mind transmission.” In these expressions, it is clear that mind is strongly emphasized. The Buddha Way is fundamentally a path of self-inquiry. Zen Buddhism claims that to clarify the self, or to clarify one’s own mind and one’s own nature, is fundamental. Besides that, there can be no other Buddha or Buddha Way.

Zeshin zebutsu, another expression similar to *sokushin zebutsu*, is found in *The Sutra of Meditation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*, translated by Kyoryo Yasha of the western region of China sometime between 424 AD ~ 452 AD. The notion this mind is Buddha is a very old one in Zen.

More than anything else, *sokushin zebutsu* is famous as a saying of Baso Doitsu (709 ~ 788), who lived in the Tang Dynasty.

Sokushin zebutsu and shikantaza

Dogen Zenji tells about Baso Doitsu's *sokushin zebutsu* or *sokushin sokubutsu* in a *jodo* (talk) in the *Eihei Koroku*.

Baso said "*Sokushin zebutsu*." Daibai studied this more than thirty years, dwelling on his mountaintop, hiding his traces in the sounds of the valley and the colors of the mountain. The ancestor Baso finally sent a monk to visit and say to Daibai, "Baso's Buddha Dharma is different these days."

Daibai responded, "How is it different?"

The monk said, "*Hishin hibutsu*." (no mind, no Buddha).

Daibai said "Even if he says 'No mind, no Buddha,' I just follow *sokushin zebutsu*."

The monk returned and told the ancestor.

Baso said, "That plum is ripe."

Dogen said "*Sokushin zebutsu* is most intimate. Year after year Daibai ripened in the middle of summer." (*Eihei Koroku*, vol. 1, no. 8)

Daibai Hojo (752~839) understood the Buddha Way through the teaching of Baso's *sokushin zebutsu* and retreated into the deep mountains for more than thirty years. He wholeheartedly practiced *sokushin zebutsu*. He was not at all upset when a monk dispatched by Baso said, "Baso's Buddha Dharma has recently changed from *sokushin zebutsu* to *hishin hibutsu*." He said, "I do not care about *hishin hibutsu*. I just follow solely *sokushin zebutsu*." Upon hearing this statement, Baso admired Daibai, saying, "A plum has ripened."

This episode featuring Daibai and Baso also appears in *Eihei Koroku*, vol. 4, no. 319. Interestingly, this *jodo* begins with the statement "The true Dharma correctly transmitted by buddhas and ancestors is simply *shikantaza*." Dogen introduces this statement as his late master Nyojo's instruction to the assembly. Here, the story is told in order to emphasize the importance of zazen (*shikantaza*). Dogen Zenji speaks of Daibai as a person who "ate pine nuts and wore lotus leaves, spending his whole life practicing zazen day and night." The story is originally found in the "Daibai Hojo" chapter in the *Record of the Transmission of the Lamp Published in the Jingde Era* (*Keitoku Dentoroku*, Taisho Tripitaka 51, p. 254 ff.). This source does not mention that Daibai practiced zazen in the mountains. Probably "spending his whole life practicing zazen" is Dogen's personal religious conviction. "I just follow *sokushin sokubutsu*" means nothing but *shikantaza*. Therefore it is not without reason that this phrase is paired with *shikantaza* in *Sotoshu Shuken* (Soto Shu Constitution).

It is understandable that Dogen Zenji writes at the beginning of *Shobogenzo* "*Sokushin Zebutsu*," "What buddhas and ancestors have maintained without exception is *sokushin zebutsu*." It is such an important phrase describing realization that it is perfectly all right to replace *sokushin zebutsu*

with zazen.

Dogen Zenji says “Sokushin zebutsu is buddhas of aspiration, practice, awakening, and nirvana.”

In *Shobogenzo* “*Sokushin Zebutsu*,” Dogen Zenji writes “Upon hearing the phrase ‘*sokushin zebutsu*,’ ignorant people think that the thoughts and awareness of sentient beings, although they have not aroused the aspiration for awakening, are already buddha. They think in this way because they have not yet met an authentic teacher.”

When ignorant people hear Baso’s well-known phrase, they erroneously think that the ordinary mind of thinking and awareness, the mind before arousing *bodhicitta* (aspiration for awakening), is unconditionally already Buddha. Dogen admonishes that it is because they have never met an authentic teacher.

Then what is *sokushin zebutsu*? Dogen writes “*Sokushin zebutsu is buddhas of aspiration, practice, awakening, and nirvana. Those who have not actualized aspiration, practice, awakening, and nirvana are not sokushin zebutsu.*”

Usually “aspiration, practice, awakening and nirvana” are thought of as four stages of Buddhist training. “Aspiration” is an abbreviation of “aspiration for Bodhi (awakening).” It means to arouse the mind that seeks for the Buddha Way. After aspiration, we move to the stage of practice. “Practice” is an abbreviation of “long-term training with diligence.” As a result of practice, we attain awakening. “Awakening” means to accomplish the Way. With this we enter into nirvana. “Nirvana” means eradication of all defilements. It is a state of attaining complete awakening. There are two kinds of nirvana; nirvana with remainder and nirvana with no residue. Nirvana with remainder is the nirvana of an awakened person who has eradicated all the defilements but is still alive with a body. Nirvana with no residue is the nirvana of an awakened person who has died and thus eradicated both the body and all defilements. Because of the idea of nirvana with no residue, the death of the Buddha is sometimes called nirvana.

Therefore, the general understanding of aspiration, practice, awakening, and nirvana is that they are four sequential stages. Aspiration comes first. After aspiration, practice begins. As a result of practice, awakening is accomplished. Then, the awakened person enters the state of nirvana with remainder. When the body dies, the awakened person finally enters nirvana with no residue.

However, Dogen Zenji writes in *Shobogenzo* “*Gyoji: Part One*” “Between aspiration, practice, awakening and nirvana, there is not a moment’s gap.” There should be no interval or gap between those four. It should be aspirationpracticeawakeningnirvana. Where aspiration is present, there is already practice. Practice is itself awakening (identity of practice and realization). This practice-awakening is nirvana. Thus “aspiration, practice, awakening, and nirvana” are not sequential stages. All are one. Buddhas are practicing this oneness of “aspiration, practice, awakening, and nirvana.” That is exactly what *sokushin zebutsu* is all about.

Shakyamuni Buddha is *sokushin zebutsu*

At the end of *Shobogenzo* “*Sokushin Zebutsu*,” Dogen Zenji emphasizes that “The buddhas spoken of here are none other than Shakyamuni Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha is *sokushin zebutsu*. When all buddhas in the past, present, and future are buddhas, they unfailingly become Shakyamuni Buddha.”

Here he teaches that *sokushin zebutsu* is Shakyamuni Buddha. All buddhas who practice aspiration, practice, awakening, and nirvana are Shakyamuni Buddha himself. Dogen Zenji declares that Shakyamuni Buddha is *sokushin zebutsu*.

Therefore for Dogen Zenji, *sokushin zebutsu* changes its meaning drastically from “The mind itself is Buddha” to “Buddha called *sokushin zebutsu*” or “Buddha of aspiration, practice, awakening, and nirvana.” This Buddha is not something far away from us. We ourselves should be a Buddha called *sokushin zebutsu*.

Originally written in Japanese by Rev. Tairyu Tsunoda

Translated by Rev. Issho Fujita

Assisted by Rev. Tonen O'Connor and Rev. Zuiko Redding