

# *Gyoji Dokan* (The Circle of the Way in Continuous Practice)

Rev. Seijun Ishii  
Professor of Komazawa University

*Gyoji Dokan* is a term that reflects the Soto Zen Buddhist view on practice and realization. This phrase derives from the beginning of *Shobogenzo Gyoji*, Part 1:

On the great road of buddhas and ancestors there is always unsurpassable practice, continuous and sustained. It forms the circle of the way and is never cut off. Between aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana, there is not a moment's gap; continuous practice is the circle of the way.

## *Gyoji*

*Gyoji dokan* is composed of two phrases: *gyoji* (行持) and *dokan* (道環). *Gyo* means “Buddhist practice” and *ji* means “preservation and maintenance.” Together they come to mean “continuously engaging in the practice.”

We also find writings in which *gyoji* is used as a contracted form of *bongyo jikai* (梵行持戒 – pure practice, observing precepts). In Chinese Buddhist scriptures we often see the phrase *bongyo jikai*, and there are some cases where *gyoji* is used as a contracted form of *bongyo jikai*. But, especially in Zen texts, when the term *gyoji* is used it tends to mean practicing the general daily activities defined by Zen as Buddhist practice with proper awareness, rather than narrowly meaning solely ascetic practice and observing precepts.

This usage can be seen in many places in Chinese Zen texts but here I would like to quote a passage from *Shobogenzo Gyoji* as a clear example of Dogen Zenji's meaning:

Even after he (Huineng) emerged in the world and expounded dharma to awaken people, he did not neglect this grinding stone. His continuous practice was rare in the world.

Dogen Zenji says that even after he became the sixth ancestral teacher, Huineng always carried the grinding stone that he had used for polishing rice as a servant under Hongren. This episode is a complete fiction created by Dogen Zenji. There is no similar account in any of the biographical materials about Huineng.

In this description by Dogen Zenji, it is very clear that the word *gyoji* means the continuous practice of discovering one's original face, rather than meaning leaving home and engaging in ascetic practice.

## *Dokan*

Next, let us explore *dokan*. This expression is very important because it shows the Sotoshu's view on practice and realization. But actually there are very few examples of the use of this word in Sotoshu texts. In *Shobogenzo* we find only four cases, all in *Shobogenzo Gyoji* and *Shobogenzo Gyobutsu Igi* (Awesome Presence of Active Buddhas). This word does not appear in Keizan Zenji's *Denkoroku*.

*Dokan* has been traditionally interpreted as "closely linked to each other without being cut off." Recently Dr. Shuudo Ishii (Komazawa University) presented a possible new interpretation.

As an example of the usual interpretation, I quote a footnote from Kosaku Yasuraoka's *Shobogenzo Gyoji*.

*Do* in *dokan* means *Butsu Do* (Buddha Way). *Kan* originally means a ring-shaped jewel. But it later comes to mean something ring-shaped in general. In *Shobogenzo Gyoji*, *dokan* is used as a verb. It expresses figuratively how the Buddha Way is - like a ring, continuously and successively revolving unceasingly.

Here *dokan* is understood as the cyclic and continuous rotation of the elements of Buddhist practice with no gap. This interpretation is very appropriate as an interpretation of *dokan* as a verb.

But *dokan* is not always used a verb, as Dr. Ishii pointed out in his book, *Study of Shobogenzo Gyoji*. He also suggests that *dokan* can possibly mean something other than "cyclic rotation" by giving examples of *dokan* as often used in *The Record of Hongzhi*.

*The empty space of dokan is never filled up.* (i.e, it neither increases nor decreases) (*Book of Serenity*, case 77, verse)

*The empty place of dokan is originally not-self* (Son version of *The Record of Hongzhi*, vol.3)

In *Shobogenzo Gyobutsu Igi*, *dokan* is used as follows;

A great sage surrenders birth and death to the mind, surrenders birth and death to the body, surrenders birth and death to the way, surrenders birth and death to birth and death. As this teaching is actualized without limitation in the past and present, the awesome presence of active buddhas is thoroughly practiced immediately. The teaching of birth and death, body and mind, as *dokan* (the circle of the way) is actualized at once.

Here Dogen Zenji rhetorically explains that ancient sages were freed from clinging to birth and death by throwing body and mind into birth and death. This state of liberation is expressed as the circle of the way (*dokan*).

Dr. Shuudo Ishii, in addition to these examples, further claimed that *dokan* had its origin in the Taoist text of Zhuangzi. He concludes that *dokan* means “the absolute one” which is the function of the truth beyond time and space.

In the seventy-five volume version of *Shobogenzo*, we also find in *Hotsubodaishin* (*Hotsumujoshin*) (Arousing the Aspiration for the Unsurpassable) an expression which emphasizes the importance of understanding a series of practice stages from aspiration to nirvana as “simultaneous.”

Shakyamuni Buddha said, “When the morning star appeared, I attained the way simultaneously with all sentient beings and the great earth.” Thus, aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana must be the simultaneity of aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana with all sentient beings.

Here Dogen Zenji reinterprets the Buddha’s statement, “I attained the way simultaneously,” proclaimed at the moment of awakening, not as “all sentient beings simultaneously attained the way” but as the simultaneity of aspiration, practice, enlightenment and nirvana.

In *Shogogenzo Gyoji Sho* (an old commentary to *Shobogenzo Gyoji*), *dokan* is described as unity of aspiration, practice, enlightenment and nirvana.

Dokan has a meaning of having nothing to do with beginning, middle and ending. It is the principle that there is no gap at all among aspiration, practice, enlightenment and nirvana.

In these examples, *dokan* means the simultaneity and unity of various aspects of practice rather than their cyclic and continuous succession with no gap.

### **Ambiguity of *gyoji dokan***

As remarked above, *gyoji dokan* means that the truth lies in sustained and continuous practice. As I mentioned, however, this word is sometimes used as a verb. In that case, it can have a nuance of “circulation.” For example, *Shobogenzo Sho* has a commentary note on *dokan* as a chain of links without beginning or end.

As for dokan, the ring on the kesa has no beginning and no end; it is impossible to see where it begins and where it ends. Dokan describes something with no beginning or end.

This note connects with Kosaku Yasuraoka's interpretation, which I mentioned earlier. Thus, *gyoji dokan* can also have a nuance of infinite circulation of the sustaining and succession of practice. In summary, *Gyoji Dokan* has two aspects:

- A "spatial" sense of uniting and integrating successive events (aspiration-practice-enlightenment-nirvana in *Shobogenzo Gyoji* (Birth-death) and *Shobogenzo Gyobutsu Igi*) as a total function of the truth
- Continuation and circulation of practice from the viewpoint of the practitioner

I would like to introduce a note on *gyoji dokan* from the *Collected Works of Dogen Zenji*, vol.1, as an example of putting those two aspects together.

Dokan means "infinity," like a ring that has no end. Aspiration, practice, enlightenment and nirvana are authentic and absolute practice in which one practice can complete all as *gyoji* by buddhas and ancestral teachers. It is infinitely protected and maintained like a ring with no beginning or end.

This note exactly expresses the ambiguous nature of *gyoji dokan*, combining two elements in one word; infinite circulation and absoluteness of each of the aspects of practice.

Originally written in Japanese by Rev. Seijun Ishii

Translated by Rev. Issho Fujita

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