

## On the Practice of *Shakyo* (Tracing the Sutras)

The Buddhist practice of *Shakyo* is a means of spreading the Buddha Way among people. It is also for praying for the fulfillment of one's greatest wish. But today, besides these overtly religious purposes, we can do *shakyo* in order to reflect on ourselves, or to attain mental well-being by mindfully tracing the sacred scriptures. It does not matter if one has faith in Buddhism or not, or if one's writing is good or not.

When we look back at the history of *shakyo*, we first find this passage in the *Nihonshoki*; "...gathering a group of transcribers, the Buddhist Tripitaka was transcribed at Kawaharaji temple<sup>1</sup> for the first time..." Later at the time of Emperor Shomu (701~756), specialists in sutra transcription were appointed and they transcribed the sutras to store or to distribute to Kokubunji temple<sup>2</sup> in various locations. Then after around the Heian Period (794~1192) people started privately doing *shakyo* as a Buddhist practice, or as a prayer/wish for healing and consoling the souls of their ancestors. Thus, *shakyo* has a long history.

<sup>1</sup> This temple was located in Nara prefecture but does not exist any more.

<sup>2</sup> These temples were built by Emperor Shomu to appease unstable state of affairs in a country.

*Shakyo* has been wonderful nourishment for many people to bring about peace of mind in their spiritual lives. It is so because when we do *shakyo* with harmonized body and mind, we are immediately in tune with Buddha's teaching. *Shakyo* has been a great spiritual support for way-seekers of all time. As people living in the present-day situation, we can cherish quiet and serene moments fostered by *shakyo*, and make this calligraphy as Zen to deeply look at the self an essential part of our everyday life.

The Heart Sutra is very short but it beautifully captures an outline of the Buddhadharma. Thus, we encourage beginners to start *shakyo* from this sutra.

### Preparation



**Tool:** Calligraphy pen

**Template:** Scripture or prototype for *shakyo*

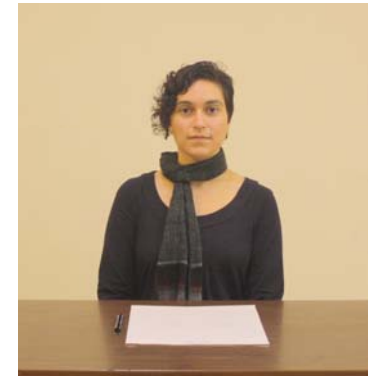
**Paper for *shakyo*:** Special paper for *shakyo* or paper which does not cause ink to blur and has a good touch with a pen

**Room:** Clean room beforehand. If you use a room with a Buddhist altar, offer incense, flowers and candles

**Dress:** Wash hands, rinse mouth and make your clothing neat

### Manner of Performing *Shakyo*

1. Sit with a good posture, regulate the breath, and allow the mind to calm down.



2. Do *gassho* (put palms together) and recite the *Four Universal Vows* and then the *Heart Sutra*.



3. Quietly, pick up a pen and start tracing from the title.



4. While tracing, take your time and use caution not to make a mistake. In the case of making an error, put a dot ( • ) right above the error and write the correct letter in the right or left margin of the same line.
5. Your wish or prayerful words may be added. In this case write the words of your wish on the underlined part after the main text. For example; “For the sake of the repose of deceased ancestors ...”, “In gratitude to ...”, “I pray for...” If just practicing *shakyo* itself is the purpose, then it is alright to skip this.
6. Write down your name and date, then “Humbly traced” at the end.
7. When tracing is over, recite the “*Fueko (the Universal Transference of Merit)*” with *gassho*, which concludes *shakyo*.

8. The traced sutra should be respectfully enshrined and can be dedicated to a temple or a Zen center at a suitable time. When mailing, fold the sutra or put it into a tube and send it off carefully.

### Things to keep in mind

1. A sutra traced wholeheartedly is very precious. Remember to treat it with special care as though treating a Buddha statue.
2. When tracing, keep a relaxed and natural posture as much as possible, without tensing up shoulders. If using a chair, sit upright at the right spot, neither too far forward nor too far back, and without leaning against the backrest. Good posture will help bring good results.

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A large, bold, black Japanese calligraphic character '写' (Shakyo) is centered on the page. It is written in a traditional style with thick, expressive strokes.

Shakyo

Tracing the Sutras

A large, bold, black Japanese calligraphic character '經' (Sutra) is centered on the page. It is written in a traditional style with thick, expressive strokes.



SOTO ZEN BUDDHISM