

Zen Women

A primer for the

chant of women ancestors

used at the

Berkeley Zen Center

Compiled Fall 2006



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A note on Romanization of Chinese Names: We used Pinyin for the main titles, and also included Wade-Giles or other spellings in parentheses if they had been used in source or other documents.

Great Teacher Mahapajapati Gotami

(ma-ha-pa-JA-pa-tee go-TA-me)

500 BCE, India

Pajapati (“maha” means “great”) was known as Gotami before the Buddha’s enlightenment; she was his aunt and stepmother. After her sister died, she raised both Shakyamuni and her own son, Nanda. After the Buddha’s enlightenment, the death of her husband and the loss of her son and grandson to the Buddha’s monastic order, she became the leader of five hundred women who had been widowed by either war or the Buddha’s conversions. She begged for their right to become monastics as well. When they were turned down, they ordained themselves. After the Buddha’s change of heart, she eventually founded the women’s order and led 500 nuns.

Source: Therigata; The First Buddhist Women by Susan Murcott

Great Teacher Dhammadinna

(da-ma-DEE-na)

500 BCE, India

Dhammadinna became a nun when her husband announced he would leave her for the monastic order. Her practice was largely a solitary one in the forest, where she developed her understanding to a subtle degree. The Buddha said her words were the same as his, and she was foremost in insight. She was a skilled teacher with many disciples of her own, said to answer questions “As easily as one would cut a lotus stalk with a knife.” Her sermons are preserved in the *Majjhima Nikaya*.

Source: Therigata; The First Buddhist Women by Susan Murcott

Great Teacher Khema

(KAY-ma)

500 BCE, India

Khema was a beautiful consort of King Bimbisāra, who awakened to the totality of the Buddha’s teaching after hearing it only once, as a lay woman. Thereafter, she left the king, became a nun, and converted many women. She became Pajapati’s assistant and helped run the first community of nuns. She was called the wisest among all women. Khema’s exchange with King Prasenajit is documented in the *Abyakatasamyutta*.

Source: Therigata; The First Buddhist Women by Susan Murcott; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Sundari-Nanda

(sun-DA-ri NAN-da)

500 BCE, India

Sundari-Nanda was the Buddha’s half-sister, born to Pajapati. Sundari means “beautiful” in Pali, and though she was indeed beautiful, her beauty did not interest her. When her brother Nanda, the Buddha’s son Rahula, and Pajapati all joined the Buddha’s sangha, she joined also. She did so initially out of love for her family, but was later declared to be most eminent in meditation.

Source: The First Buddhist Women by Susan Murcott

Great Teacher Patacara

(pa-ta-CHAR-a)

500 BCE, India

When Patacara suddenly lost her husband, both children, her parents and her brother to violent death, she went mad with grief. After wandering senselessly for some time, she encountered the Buddha at Varanasi. He said to her, “Sister, recover your presence of mind,” bringing her back to her senses. She begged for relief from her pain, and he taught her the inevitability of suffering when we cling to forms. She eventually became a great leader of women and converted many other women who had suffered the loss of a child.

Source: Therigata; The First Buddhist Women by Susan Murcott; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Uppalavana

(OOP-a-la-VA-na)

500 BCE, India

Uppalavana chose to renounce the world and live a life of solitary practice. One day, a cousin hid in her hut and raped her. After the assault, Buddhist nuns were forbidden from doing solitary practice, and Uppalavana took up residence in a community of nuns. She eventually acquired the ability to transform her body into any shape and was known as the first among disciples in mystical power.

Source: The First Buddhist Women by Susan Murcott

Great Teacher Jing Jian

(jing jien)

5th century CE, China

Jing Jian (Jing Cheng) means “measure of quietude.” Having raised herself from a young age, Jing Jian felt drawn to Buddhism, but had no one to instruct her. When she met a monk who had a monastery in Nanking, she went to see him and was awakened upon hearing the Dharma. She received the precepts from a senior monk, becoming the first Buddhist nun in China, and founded the Bamboo Forest Convent with twenty-four followers.

Source: Lives of the Nuns, translated by Kathryn Ann Tsai (#28)

Great Teacher Zong Ji

(tsong gee)

504-575, China

Little is known about Zong Ji (Zong Chi, Tsung-ch’ih) except that she joined Bodhidharma and his disciples in Luoyang. Some think she was the daughter of an emperor (possibly the famous emperor Wu) or his consort. She is named in Chinese accounts of Bodhidharma and his four Dharma heirs (“You have my skin”). In a chapter called *Kattō*, Dogen makes the point that she and Bodhidharma’s other disciples received his teaching completely, and that each being realizes a unique awakening.

Source: Zen’s Chinese Heritage by Andy Ferguson; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Ling Zhao

(ling jow)

762-808, China

Ling Zhao was the daughter of Layman Pang, a famous Zen adept. When Pang announced that he was leaving home to seek teachings and meditate, she convinced her father to let her accompany him. She did this by reciting from the *Vimalakirti Sutra* and arguing that no one is really man or woman; the essential qualities of men and women do not exist. She traveled extensively with her father. Her debates with him, which she usually won, are included in the collection of Pang's sayings and poetry. She died sitting up at a chosen time, apparently as a last comment on her ability to beat him.

Source: *Record of Layman Pang* by Ruth Fuller Sasaki;
Women of the Way by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Tai Shan

(tai shan)

9th century, China

This character in a famous koan was known as “Straight ahead tea lady” or “Old woman of Tai Shan.” Tai Shan was one of five sacred Buddhist mountains in China.

There was an old woman on the Mount Tai (Tai Shan) path. A monk asked her, “Where is the path to Mount Tai?” The old woman said, “Go straight ahead.” The monk went on. The woman said, “My dear reverend, you too go off like that.” Monks came, one after another, asked the same question, and received the same answer. Later, one of the monks told Zhaozhou [Joshu] about it and Zhaozhou said, “Wait here for awhile. Let me check her out.” He went to the woman and said, “Where is the path to Mount Tai?” The woman said, “Go straight ahead.” Zhaozhou went on. The woman said, “My dear reverend, you too go off like that.” Zhaozhou came back and said to the assembly, “I have checked out that old woman for you.”

Source: Dogen's *300 Koan Shobogenzo*, #29

Great Teacher Moshan

(mo shan)

9th century, China

The name Moshan (full name: Moshan Lioran) means Summit Mountain, and she was famous in her time. She was the first woman who had a chapter of her own in the transmission records, the first woman recorded as an official Dharma heir in the lineages, and the first woman recorded as the teacher of a male master (Guanqi Zhixian).
Source: Dogen's *Shobogenzo*, “*Raihaitokuzui*”; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Liu Tie Mo

(lee-o tee-eh mow)

780-859, China

Known as Iron Grinder Liu for her ability to completely crush opponents in Dharma combat, she was transmitted by Guishan Lingyou. Her story is told in the Blue Cliff Record, where Yuanwu Keqin (Yuan Wu K'e Chi'in) said of her, “Hesitate and you lose your body and your life.”

Source: #60 *Book of Serenity*; #24 *Blue Cliff Record*;
Women of the Way by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Shi Ji

(sure gee)

6th century, China

Little is known about her early life, but when Shi Ji arrived at Jinhua mountain, where Jinhua Juzhi lived as the head priest of a temple, she did not follow etiquette and remove her hat. She told the head monk she would do so only if he could say something worth hearing. When Juzhi found himself speechless, a spirit appeared and told him to stay, and his teacher showed up the next day. Thanks to Shi Ji's challenge, Juzhi eventually became enlightened. He was known as "One Finger Chan" due to his method of answering questions by holding up one finger.

Source: #19 *Blue Cliff Record*; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Mai You Ci

(mai yo tzu)

8-9th century, China

Literally "Seller of Fried Cakes", she is famous for her encounter with the Zen master Deshan.

One day Deshan met an old woman selling refreshments by the roadside. He set down his knapsack to buy some refreshments, and the old woman asked what writings he was carrying that were so dear. They were commentaries on the Diamond Cutter Sutra, books he considered so indispensable that he carried them with him everywhere he went. "The Diamond Cutter Sutra, replied the old woman, says 'Past mind can't be grasped, present mind can't be grasped, future mind can't be grasped.' Which mind does the learned monk desire to refresh?" Deshan, despite all his scholarly learning, was rendered speechless by the old woman's wise words.

Source: #4 *Blue Cliff Record*

Great Teacher Miao Zong

(miao tsong)

1095-1170, China

Miao Zong married a scholar-official but was inspired by her sister-in-law Gongshi Daoren (d. 1124) to devote herself to Zen practice. Outspoken and independent, she became a student of Dahui Zonggao, was ordained, and became the abbess of Cishou nunnery, where she had Dharma heirs. Along with Miaodao, she is considered one of the two most important women teachers in the Song period. She is best remembered for her Dharma combat with the shuso, Wanan. In their encounter she appeared stark naked and announced that her genitals were the source of all Buddhas and ancestors: "They all come forth from here."

Source: www.MTsource.org, Grace Schireson

Great Teacher Miao Xin

(miao shin)

840-895, China

Miao Xin was the Dharma heir of Yangshan Huiji. She was serving tea to seventeen visiting monks at Yangshan's temple when she overheard them discussing the Sixth Patriarch's koan "Is the flag moving or the wind?" She scoffed at their misunderstanding and instructed them in the koan's real meaning. Afterward, the monks became her disciples. Miao Xin is presented as a model of mature practice by Dōgen.

Source: Dogen's *Shobogenzo*, "Raihaitokuzui"; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Mugai Nyodai

(mugai nyodai)

1223-1298, Japan

Mugai Nyodai became a disciple of Wuxue Zuyuan (Mugaku Sogen), the first abbot of Engakuji. It is not known when she started her Zen practice, but even though she was the elder of the two women, she was the niece of the founding teacher of Tokeiji, Kakusan Shido, who also studied with Wuxue. Mugai-sama became his Dharma heir and the first female Rinzai Zen master in Japan. She also studied with the famous National Zen Master and founder of Tofukuji, Enni Benen, Shoichi Kokushi. She founded Keiaiji, which became the head temple of the Five Mountains Convent system of Rinzai Zen. She is still honored today in imperial convents as their founder.

Source: Days of Discipline and Grace, Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies, Columbia Univ.; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Yodo

1318-1396, Japan

Yodo, a former princess, was the fifth abbess at Tokeiji. Since there was no legal process for women to initiate divorce, Tokeiji was established by Kakusan Shido, the widow of a samurai lord, to provide refuge and grant divorces for desperate women. The village and Tokeiji functioned as an underground railway for runaway (and often abused) wives of the Tokugawa era. Tokeiji was famous for its gardens and Wesak celebration—the festival held every spring to honor Buddha's birth. Yodo's poems became teaching koans for generations of nuns: "Decorate the heart of the beholder, / For the Buddha of the flower hall / Is nowhere else."

Sources: Days of Discipline and Grace, Institute for Medieval Japanese Studies, Columbia Univ.; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Myochi-ni

13th century, Japan

Keizan Jokin's grandmother Myochi-ni studied with Myozen, supported Dogen, and influenced Keizan. Keizan's ability to recognize the first female Sōtō Zen Dharma heir was made possible by his strong relationship to his grandmother and to his mother, Ekan. Both of these women were credited by Keizan with the inspiration and guidance of his practice.

Source: Grace Schireson

Great Teacher Eshun-ni

(eh-shoon-nee)

1362 –1402, Japan

When her brother refused to ordain her because she was too beautiful, Eshun scarred her face with a hot poker. Her brother relented and finally ordained her. She was often harassed and mistreated by the monks, but this didn't stop her from surpassing them in debate. She cremated herself alive at the end of her life while sitting zazen. As she sat upright in the bonfire, her brother is reputed to have asked her whether it was hot, and she replied, "For one living the Way, hot and cold are unknown." There's a memorial stone at the site at Saikoji temple (also known as Doryo-son) in Kanagawa prefecture.

Source: <http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~qm9t-kndu/saijoji.htm>, www.mtsource.org

Great Teacher Ekyu-ni

14th century, Japan

Keizan praised his mother Ekan's devotion to teaching women and followed her example by transmitting one of his female disciples, Ekyu (ca. 1325), the first Sōtō Dharma transmission to a woman. In order to support Ekyu's training, Keizan rewrote Dogen's explanations on the Buddhist precepts in *hiragana*. Apparently Ekyu, like many women of her time had not been given an education that included the Chinese characters, the ideograms known in Japanese as *kanji*. *Hiragana*, also known as women's script, is a phonetic syllabary, designed for use by people who were not fully educated.

Source: *Women Living Zen*, Paula Kane Robinson Arai

Great Teacher Soshin-ni

(so-shin-nee)

1588-1675, Japan

Born Onaa Tsuboneshe into a prominent samurai family. She was married at fifteen and had three sons before divorcing and moving into an important Rinzai Zen temple complex in Kyoto. She instructed women of the Tokugawa shogun's harem in Zen—women who could not leave lay life and yet lived together as a group, often in sexual servitude. She studied with the noted Rinzai master Takuan Soho (1573-1645). She was ordained a nun, Soshin (ancestor's mind), in 1660 and was given a large temple complex by Tokugawa Iemitsu. She had many men and women students and left behind two lengthy Zen writings, including the *Soshin-ni Hogo*. During her lifetime, as spiritual advisor to the shogun, she was as important as the prime minister of Japan. Source: *Soshin-ni Hogo* (translated for the first time into English by Miriam Levering with Grace Schireson); www.mtsource.org; www.aarweb.org

Great Teacher Zhiyuan Xinggang

(jur ywen shing gon)

1597-1654, China

Xinggang was an only child in a scholarly and religious family. At age 18 she found herself engaged to be married, despite her requests to enter the religious life. When her intended husband died before they were married, she was sent to live with his parents anyway, to fulfill her duties as daughter-in-law. As a testament to her religious fervor, Xinggang gave up eating and drinking. She was finally permitted to begin formal training with the elderly Master Tianci Cixing. She was ordained by Master Yuanwu but experienced awakening with his disciple Tongshen, with the Zen koan, "What was your original face before your mother and father were born?" Xinggang was designated a Dharma heir by Tongshen in the Rinzai lineage. She became an abbess, left behind teaching words, and had several female successors.

Source: Beata Grant, "Female Holder of the Lineage," in *Late Imperial China*, Volume 17, Number 2, December 1996.

Great Teacher Ryonen Genso

Obaku Zen Nun/Artist

1646-1711, Japan

Ryonen was a companion to the imperial princess for many years. Her brothers were Obaku monks, and she herself was a master calligrapher. After the princess's death, Ryonen left her husband and children and entered a Rinzai training monastery. Because she was too beautiful she couldn't find anyone willing to let her train with them, until she scarred her face with a hot iron. She eventually studied with Hakuo Dotai, who certified her enlightenment. After his death, she became abbess of Taiun-ji. Her poems and calligraphy are still renowned today.

Source: Stephen Addiss, *The Art of Zen*; www.MTsource.org

Great Teacher Yoshihime

14th century, Japan

Yoshihime was the daughter of a general. When trying to gain entrance to a lecture at Engakuji, she was asked “What is the gate through which all Buddhas come into the world?” Yoshihime forced the gatekeeper’s head between her legs: “Look, look,” she said. When the gatekeeper responded, “In the middle there is a fragrance of wind and dew,” Yoshihime rejected his words, saying he was not fit to keep the gate but should rather be tending the garden. When the abbot’s attendant came and posed the same question of Yoshihime, “What is it, the gate through which the Buddhas come into the world?” her answer was the same. She grabbed his head and held it between her legs, saying: “Look, look!” The attendant said, “The Buddhas of the three worlds come giving light.” This time, Yoshihime accepted the monk’s answer. “This monk is one with the eye; he saw the 84,000 Dharma gates thrown open all together,” she said, meaning that all paths to enlightenment shine through each and every form. Yoshihime was admitted to Engakuji for the public lecture.

Source: Leggett’s *Warrior Koans*

Great Teacher Tachibana no Someko

1660-1705, Japan

Tachibana no Someko was a concubine of a Japanese feudal war lord. A depression that set in after several of her children died young was lifted through koan study with Master Ugan of Ryukoji, with whom she experienced a verified awakening. She wrote a book [Wastepaper Record] about her awakening experiences. It so impressed Shibayama Zenkei, head of the Nanzen-ji branch of Rinzai Zen, that he copied it by hand. Eventually it was translated into English in a small print run. “The ancients said that collected scriptures are entirely torn-up wastepaper,” she wrote. “Now I have collected a few useless words and

made this Wastepaper Record. Perhaps someone will cover the miso [paste] with it, or then again, maybe someone will store it away and it will become food for worms. This or that, anything would be fine. I leave it entirely up to you.” She also wrote a commentary on the Mumonkan, but it has yet to be translated.

Source: Grace Schireson; “*Wastepaper Record*,” translated by Sallie King and Sueki Fumihiko

Great Teacher Otagaki Rengetsu

1791-1875, Japan

Otagaki Rengetsu was born in Kyoto and served at the Kameoka Castle, where she was trained as a young woman in Japanese traditional arts. At the age of 33, having lost her mother, her brother, her husband, and all three of her children to death, she became a nun, adopting the name Rengetsu, or “Lotus Moon.” She lived with her stepfather, who had also taken vows, in the Chion’in temple in Kyoto. After his death, Rengetsu began making ceramics—mostly tea pots, sake bottles, and cups—inscribed with her own poetry and calligraphy. Her work was widely admired in her time and is still prized today by both Japanese and foreign collectors. She is considered one of Japan’s finest female calligraphers.

Source: www.pacificasiamuseum.org.

[see also Patricia Fister, *Japanese Women Artists, 1600-1900*]

Great Teacher Nagasawa Sozen

1880-1956, Japan

A disciple of Harada Daiun Sogaku, Nagasawa Sozen studied both Sōtō and Rinzai Zen. She was abbess of the Tokyo Nuns' Practice Center and head nun of Kannon-ji, one of the most important Japanese convents. She had many disciples, including lay women. During the 1930s and 1940s, she became a leader for Japanese Buddhist women, running a Zen practice center and leading retreats without the supervision of a male Zen master. After her death, her students compiled a book about her teachings called *A Collection of Meditation Experiences*.

Source: *Sanzen Taikenshu* by Koji Iizuka; *Women of the Way* by Jiko Sallie Tisdale

Great Teacher Nogami Senryo

1883-1980, Japan

Born in 1883, Nogami Senryo practiced in an inconspicuous temple in Nagoya and tried to live according to Dogen's teachings. She practiced Zadatsu Ryubo—die sitting, die standing—following Dogen's instruction to do all activities with complete presence and attention. At the moment of her death at age 97, she was standing (in front of the Buddha sculpture in the Worship Hall), considered a mark of highest achievement in Zen.

Source: *Women Living Zen* by Paula Kane Robinson Arai

Great Teacher Kojima Kendo

1898-1995, Japan

At the time of World War II, Sōtō nuns were given only a fraction of the money allotted to men. Their education was limited, transmissions were not officially recognized, and they couldn't be part of the administration's highest level. Because of Kojima Kendo's almost single-handed efforts, these inequities were changed. A tireless advocate for Buddhist women, Kojima Kendo was the first leader of the Pan-Japanese Buddhist Nun Association, served as executive director of the Japanese Federation of Buddhist Women, and was the only Japanese of either gender at the Third International Buddhist conference in 1954. Famous for her spirit and her exclamation *Yaiya dekiru*—Hey, you can do it!

Source: *Women Living Zen* by Paula Kane Robinson Arai; Stephen Addiss, *The Art of 20th Century Zen Masters*

Great Teacher Joshin Kasai

1919 - 1984, Japan & US

Joshin Kasai was a student of Kodo Sawaki Roshi at Antaji and later Uchiyama Roshi. In 1973, she came to San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara to teach Nyoho-e sewing, and returned many times to sew Buddha's Robe. According to her student Zenkei Blanche Hartman, her essential teaching was to "Sew with heart." At Tassajara, she sewed by kerosene lamplight late into the night to finish a suitcase of unfinished *rakusus*. Saying, "Every *kesa* is the whole body of Buddha," she insisted that Buddha's Robe, once started, must be finished.

Source: Braverman, *Living and Dying in Zazen; Buddha's Robe is Sewn*, compiled by Jean Selkirk, sewing teacher at Berkeley Zen Center