

Zen Center of Los Angeles

## THE PRACTICE OF SUTRA COPYING

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Collected Materials and Writings  
for Zen Training Purposes only

This introduction to the practice of hand copying sutras contains the following:

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### Sutra Copying: A Teisho

by Taizan Maezumi Roshi

What is the practice of copying sutras? *The Lotus Sutra* says repeatedly that those who copy it will, just in the act of copying itself, accomplish supreme enlightenment. Copying is an excellent way to fully put yourself into a sutra. You are one with copying and one with the sutra, truly sensing and feeling it. The action and object are easily unified. When you are copying, there is a sense of copying and also of the sutra allowing you to copy it. This interrelationship is felt intimately and, such a state of being, is itself supreme enlightenment.

Which sutra should you copy? You can copy any sutra or even part of a long one. Copying the *Heart Sutra* or *Hannya Shingyo* is a very common practice in Japan these days. Of course these are copied in Chinese, but there is no reason for you not to copy in English. There are different ways to copy a sutra. Some people copy one stroke or one word, do three bows, sit down, write another stroke and then do three bows again. Others write one character then make a

bow. Others simply copy. However you express your respect towards the sutra, please do it with sincere devotion and reverence.

In his writings on the *Lotus Sutra*, Dogen Zenji wrote of the lotus as the blossom of the subtle dharma. The lotus is a very unusual flower. Do you know its unique characteristics? When a lotus blooms, the seeds grow together with the flower. Usually a flower blooms and after that it turns into seeds. But not so with the lotus. It is amazing. When the lotus blooms, big lotus seeds are already growing in the bottom of the flower.

Consider these seeds and flower as an analogy for our life. Our life is like this blossoming. If we say that the major part of our life is 20, 40, or 50 years, that period could be called the flowering. But the result or the seed does not necessarily come after life or the flowering as such, but now within our life, the seed is always existing. The result is already here with us! How do we appreciate that the life which continues is here, now?

Another characteristic of the lotus is that it grows in the mud and yet is not defiled. At the end of our meals, we chant: “May we exist in muddy water with purity like a lotus, thus we bow to Buddha.” This translation is well done, but there is another point in addition to this pure and genuine quality. Chinese is a very rich language. The same words are pronounced in a different way according to the dynasties. Personally I like to chant this verse with the T’ang Dynasty pronunciation instead of how we do it in Japanese, which is more like the Han Dynasty pronunciation.

So using the T’ang Dynasty pronunciation, this verse can also mean “to live in the world.” While living in the world, live like the lotus flower, not attached to the water or the mud. When water drops on the lotus leaf, the water rolls off right away. The analogy for us is to live like the water droplet, not attaching anywhere. So consider both implications, that of being pure and genuine and, at the same time, being free. Not being attached, the mind is kept in a genuine and pure way.

What does the lotus flower stand for? The subtle dharma. In the “Gatha on Opening the Sutra,” we chant:

*The Dharma, incomparably profound and infinitely subtle,  
Is rarely encountered even in millions of ages.  
Now we hear it, receive and maintain it.  
May we all realize the Tathagata’s true meaning.*

That subtle dharma is this subtle dharma of the lotus blossom. How do you receive it? How do you maintain it? Living this subtle dharma everyday, how do you see it? Allowing this subtle dharma into yourself moment after moment, how do you see it? When chanting, we experience it. When reading, we experience it. When writing and copying, we experience it. What we are truly copying? Literally we can say that I am writing my life through my action of copying this most precious subtle dharma.

So what is truly the sutra? And how do you truly read or revolve the sutra? How do you see it, hear it, and maintain it now as the subtle dharma? The sutra must be alive as the functioning of

your life! Please trust yourself. Trust in yourself as the sutra, as the dynamic, boundless dharma itself. This is what I mean when I say be nice to yourself. Trusting your life as the sutra is the best way to be nice to yourself.

This practice of sutra copying has wonderful merit. I encourage you to do it and enjoy it. Through copying, you will enrich your life. Unify yourself with what you do! This is actually the key, this sense of unity of you as you are and as your life interpenetrating with the life of literally everything, do you see?

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## Practical Guidelines for Sutra Copying

by Roshi Egyoku Nakao

### 1. WHAT TO COPY

You may copy any sutra, our daily chants, or a portion of Buddhist texts or the *Gate of Sweet Nectar* liturgy. The *Heart Sutra* in English is often a favorite. You may wish to undertake copying longer texts, such as *The Lotus Sutra*, which may take a few years.

### 2. MATERIALS

The materials you use may depend on the text selected. In the beginning, you may wish to copy in a straightforward way.

- Choose a pen that you can write with comfortably. The ink can be any color.
- Select paper that has rag content. It may be loose-leaf or bound as a blank book. Or you may use a large art paper. Art supply and stationary stores are good resources for pens and paper. Or use whatever paper you have on hand.
- Keep all of your materials, including the text, wrapped in a clean cloth. You may place your sutra copying on your altar at home. The sutra are the words of the Buddha, so please treat it with care.

### 3. HOW TO COPY

- Sutra copying is a spiritual practice and should be approached with a heart-mind of devotion and reverence.

- Wear clean clothes or your robe/sitting clothes and rakusu, if you have one. Wash your hands before copying.
- Prepare an orderly and clean environment.
- Prepare the altar by lighting the candle and offering incense or a plant/lavender buds. You may wish to sit quietly for a few minutes, then do a brief service as follows:

Do three bows.

Chant the *Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo*:

**ENMEI JUKKU KANNON GYO**  
**Ten Phrase Kannon Sutra for Prolonging Life**

KAN ZE ON  
NA MU BUTSU  
YO BUTSU U IN  
YO BUTSU U EN  
BUP PO SO EN  
JO RAKU GA JO  
CHO NEN KAN ZE ON  
BO NEN KAN ZE ON  
NEN NEN JU SHIN KI  
NEN NEN FU RI SHIN (*Chant 3 times*)

Kanzeon!  
At one with Budhha  
Directly Buddha  
Also indirectly Buddha  
And indirectly Buddha, Dharma, Sangha.  
Joyful, pure, eternal, being!  
Morning mind is Kanzeon.  
Evening mind is Kanzeon.  
Nen, nen arises from Mind.  
Nen, nen is not separate from Mind (*Chant 4 times*)

Chant the Dedication (You may add your own sentiments to the dedication.)

“May this compassionate dana be extended to all beings, and  
may we realize the Buddha Way together. ...

All Buddhas throughout space and time,  
 All Bodhisattva-Mahasattvas,  
 Maha Prajna Paramita.

- When you are seated, recite the “Gatha on Opening the Sutra” before beginning.

*The Dharma, incomparably profound and infinitely subtle  
 Is always encountered even in millions of ages  
 Now we hear it, receive and maintain it  
 May we realize the Tathagata’s true meaning.*

(Note: The change in the second line from “Is rarely encountered” on page 2 to “Is always encountered” on page 5 was made by Roshi Bernie Glassman.

- End your copying session by chanting the “Four Great Bodhisattva Vows” and putting everything away.

*Numberless beings, I vow to serve them.  
 Inexhaustible delusions, I vow to end them.  
 Boundless dharmas, I vow to master them.  
 Unsurpassable Buddha Way, I vow to embody it.*

- When copying as a group, please respect the silence of the group. Begin and end together. If you must leave early, wrap up your things and bow at the altar before you leave.
- Keep your copying periods to a reasonable time, such as a half hour. Many people find it difficult to copy for more than one hour at a time.
- Be fully present. Do not drink or eat while copying, listen to the radio, or be otherwise distracted, etcetera.

#### 4. THE PRACTICE OF COPYING

- Sutra copying is a form of zazen. Settle body, breath, and mind. Become totally one with each letter of the sutra. In this way, you receive the sutra and the sutra receives you.
- Aim for an even and constant handwriting. Through copying, your handwriting will “improve.” All handwriting is suitable for sutra copying.

- Correct your mistakes carefully. You can use white-out or paste fresh paper over an error. Missing words or lines are written in the margins or at the end. Do not crumble and toss away a page with errors. All copied sutras should be properly disposed of by burning.
- You may wish to illustrate your copying. Sky's the limit—allow your creativity to flow.
- Think of a simple dedication and write it at the beginning or end of your copied sutra. You may wish to dedicate the merits of your copying to a particular person, place, or occasion.
- When you have completed copying a sutra, write your name, date, and place.
- Please keep it in a special place in your home. Or, you may wish to gift it to someone.
- When you no longer wish to keep your copy for whatever reason, please dispose of it by carrying out a dignified ritual of burning the sutra and carefully disposing of the ashes.
- Give yourself fully to this practice; it will reveal itself to you.

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## **One Word, One Buddha**

Excerpt from John Stevens, *Sacred Calligraphy of the East*, Shambhala Publications, 1995, third edition, revised & expanded, pp. 113-114.

The five virtues of shakyō are:

Venerating the letters with your eyes  
 Keeping the letters in your heart  
 Chanting the letters with your mouth  
 Writing the letters with your hands  
 Becoming one with Buddha

The physical relics of Buddha are his ashes; the relics of his teaching are the copied sutras. Those sutras proclaim the great virtue of “receiving, preserving, reading, copying, and chanting” the holy texts. Shakyō is thus a type of skillful means (upaya) enabling others to approach the Buddhist teaching.

On another level shakyō is an act of worship, an offering for the repose of the deceased to help them avoid evil and suffering in their search for final release.

Shakyō is also a prayer. Many rulers in China, Tibet, and Japan wrote sutras adding the post script “For the protection of the country and the welfare of all my subjects.” There are numerous cases of people recovering from illnesses, being saved from calamity, or receiving some wonderful benefit after doing shakyō. Perhaps it is true that “if one copies the sutras all petitions will be answered,” but individual requests should not be the exclusive purpose of shakyō.

Finally, shakyō is a form of meditation. It is written Zen, for it requires the same determination and concentration as sitting Zen. One cannot write properly if one is upset, angry, or distracted in any way. Writing intensely in silence with a composed mind purifies the heart. Each word is a new Buddha.

## Shakyō Manual

Excerpt from John Stevens, *Sacred Calligraphy of the East*, Shambhala Publications, 1995, third edition, revised & expanded, pp. 116-118.

There are many different methods of shakyō, varying from temple to temple and from individual to individual. Some are quite elaborate. Every July at Enryakuji, the head temple of the Tendai sect on Mt. Hiei, a Nyohō Shakyō Kai (sesshin) is held. Based on the practice of Jikaku Daishi (Ennin: 794 – 864) for three days the *Lotus Sūtra* is copied according to a complicated ritual. Others are simple. At Tōdaiji in Nara, a ball-point pen or even a pencil may be used. The finished sūtras are stored inside the Great Buddha there. In the Nichiren school one must wear a mask that covers the nose and mouth and not touch the paper with the hands during shakō, and when tired or distracted one must chant the daimoku: *namu myōhō rengekyō*.

Individuals try to do some shakyo every day and in the past groups tended to do shakyo on one of the six fast days of the month: the 8th, 14th, 15th, 23rd, 25th, and 30th. Actually, any time or place is suitable.

The most popular sūtra is the one-page *Mahā-prajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya Sūtra*, the *Heart Sūtra*. Versions in Sanskrit, Chinese, Tibetan, Korean, and English are given in this manual. Once one decides on the language and script the following procedure is recommended.

Completely clean and scrub the room and table that will be used for copying. Since one’s spirit should flow through the body and into the ink, it is better to use a fountain or script pen (or a brush if writing in Chinese) rather than a ball-point pen or pencil, although, as noted above, even these are permissible. Prepare fresh paper and make sure the writing instruments are clean and arranged neatly on the desk. Do not eat or drink anything for some time before starting, and do not eat, drink, or smoke while copying. If possible purify oneself with a thorough washing. Put on clean clothes, light incense, and sit quietly in meditation for a few minutes.

In classical shakyō practice one puts the palms of the hands together in gassho, and makes three great prostrations (touching the forehead to the ground), but a simple bow is sufficient. Read or chant the sūtra through one time. In Japan a stylized invocation is then read, often the Four Great Vows:

*shujō muhen seigan do*  
*bonnō mujin seigan dan*  
*hōmon muryō seigan gaku*  
*butsudō mujō seigan jō*

*Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them all*  
*The passions are inexhaustible, I vow to cut them off*  
*The dharma is unfathomable, I vow to master it*  
*Buddha's way is supreme, I vow to attain it*

Any such resolution will do.

Keep the back straight, whether in a chair or sitting Japanese style (seiza), relax the shoulders, breathe from the tanden (the physical and spiritual center of the body just below the navel), and hold the brush firmly but not too tightly. Write each stroke with full concentration of body and mind, as if swinging a heavy wooden sword. The strokes should be thick, strong, and clear, the bigger and more powerful the better. Copy the sūtra with the entire body, not just the hands. Each letter should be written with a feeling of gratitude for the teaching. Do not hurry or copy absentmindedly.

Work straight through without stopping. If a mistake is made (in shakyo a mistake is a sign of a lack of concentration) draw a single line through it (if writing in Chinese make a circle through the character); omitted characters should be written in the margin. Depending on the language and the script, it should take from forty minutes to 1 1/2 hours to make a copy of the Heart Sūtra. Upon completion, one may record the date and one's name at the bottom of the page along with any special petition. A concluding invocation may be recited:

*May the virtue of this sūtra enable all to have correct thoughts,  
 hear the dharma, see Buddha, dwell in the Pure Land, and realize enlightenment.*

Complete the session with a bow of gratitude. The copied sūtra should be kept in a proper place, for example, within an altar or stupa if available. It should never be thrown away or used for any other purpose

The simple method described above is appropriate for groups or individuals. Variations include using gold or silver ink on blue paper, using different styles of calligraphy or inks, making three prostrations for each character or word, combining scripts— there are many possibilities.

It is best to use the *Heart Sūtra* exclusively at first, especially if the script is unfamiliar. Other popular Buddhist texts are the *Diamond Cutter Sūtra*, the *Kannon Sūtra*, (the twenty-fifth



chapter of the *Lotus Sūtra*), and the *Amida Sūtra*. Shakyō of the entire *Lotus Sūtra* is done fairly often.

Shakyō is not limited to Buddhist sūtras. Many of the Upanisads and the Bhagavad Gita make excellent texts for shakyō and, of course, Christian copying of the Bible has a rich tradition. Nor is shakyō necessarily limited to “holy” texts; poetry or other forms of literature may also be copied with great spiritual benefit.

## **Calm Through Copying Sutra-writing by Hand to Boost the Brain**

By Tomoko Otake, Staff writer

Published Sunday, Dec. 24, 2006 in THE JAPAN TIMES

Amid the current national craze over anything that might boost brainpower — or at least help its legions of elderly to retain their mental functions — a relatively low-key, centuries-old Buddhist practice has lately been attracting a lot of attention.

In fact, *shakyo* — copying Buddhist sutras by hand — has been shown to be effective in preventing dementia, according to a recent study by Tohoku University Professor Ryuta Kawashima and the major publishing house Gakken Co.

Kawashima, who is Japan's top brain expert, measured the cerebral activity of a sample of senior citizens in Sendai by fitting groups of them with sensors on their heads to monitor changes in their brain's blood vessels. In some 1,000 tests of participants, the study found that when the subjects were writing out sutras by hand, their brains became more active in certain areas than when they were performing any of 160 other tasks, including rolling walnuts in their palms, doing cat's cradle or sticking pieces of colored paper onto pictures.

### **Hands-on Buddhism**

For Shudo Miura, head priest of the Tokyo-based Buddhist temple Honjuin, that hardly came as a surprise. Explaining that shakyo is the most hands-on way to practice Buddhism, he said, "Many people today feel the need to fill their spiritual void, and shakyo is the easiest way to understand Buddhism, even if the person does not know the sutra."

Shakyo's history dates back to the eighth century, when Emperor Shomu had temples built throughout Japan and demand for copies of sutras suddenly mushroomed. Because there were, of course, no printers back then, the copies had to be transcribed by hand, Miura said.

The scripture most often used for shakyo, Miura pointed out, is the 276-character "Hannya Shingyo," known as "The Doctrine of Emptiness." That text, which contains the essence of Mahayana Buddhism, is popular because it is short enough to be transcribed in about an hour, he said.

Traditionally, it was the work of respected monks and bureaucrats to transcribe shakyo, and many specialized in just that. But then, around the 11th century, samurai clans started copying them to pray for their prosperity, according to Miura. From then on, the practice slowly spread to commoners, and nowadays many people engage in shakyo in pursuit of particular aims, such as getting into schools of their choice or praying for the souls of ancestors or *mizuko* (aborted or miscarried babies).

Because of its religious nature, Miura stressed that shakyo should not be treated as calligraphy. In shakyo, he said, it is the sincerity — not the quality — of your writing that matters.

"You should observe the characters with your eyes, and write each one as neatly as possible, as if you were taking Buddha into your mind," he said. "That way, you will realize that you are in fact synonymous with Buddha."

Miura opens his temple — which is in a modern concrete building on the busy Loop 7 road in Tokyo's Ota Ward — daily for anyone to drop by and engage in shakyo between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.

### **Free of Thoughts**

During a recent visit there, I found a group of people in the main hall quietly copying a sutra from top to bottom, right to left on traditional Japanese *washi* paper using *fude* pens whose bodies are filled with ink, and whose "nibs" are stiff, but slightly flexible, brushes.

"I find it very calming, and when I'm writing it, my mind is free of thoughts," said a 70-year-old woman who lives nearby after her session. Another in her 60s said that young people, too, can benefit from shakyo — not so much for religious training, but just to "keep their mind in comfort."

Asked if he had any tips for first-timers, Miura thought a moment and replied: "Try to focus your mind, and don't be interrupted by phone calls or other distractions until at least you finish one line, which is made up of 17 characters. I also recommend that, before you start, you clean up your room and burn incense, instead of rushing to scribble the text on your bed or something. And try to keep your mind in order; it should be a time for mental training."

Besides Miura's Honjuin temple, there are a number of temples of various Buddhist sects in Japan that offer shakyo for visitors. For those who prefer to do it at home, shakyo stationery sets, including brush, ink and paper, are available at stationery stores, or via the Internet from around 6,000 yen.

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