
Chanting the Zen Matriarchs

By François Loiseau, disciple of Master Taisen Deshimaru

Every day in the temples, or during sesshin, we chant the list of the Zen Patriarchs, out of respect. Out of gratitude as well, because it is through their life of practice that the Way was transmitted to us. This chanting of the Patriarchs also marks the fact that we belong to Buddha's family: it is - in a way - our family tree.

Except that in a family tree, we find the names of the fathers and the mothers. Here, the women are not quoted in the tree, although they occupied a place as important as the men's place in the transmission of Buddha's Dharma, and the fact that women Daiocho strongly marked the transmission history of their imprint.

So, to sing the list of their names is to express them also our gratitude and our respect. It is to fill an important gap in the long history of the transmission.

To sing the names of Matriarchs, it is to show the "*spirit of the grandmother*" evoked by Dogen in the "Tenzo Kyokun", in the arms of whom the wounded child find a refuge, nested in the depths of our wandering and sick skandha.

To sing the names of Matriarchs, it is to abandon ourselves to the Undifferentiated, which sees our contradictions with the eye of benevolence and compassion.

To sing the names of Matriarchs, it is to tell publicly the place of the women in the transmission of the Way, generation after generation, as parents transmit life, generation after generation.

Already in India, in the first Sangha of the Buddha and during Shakyamuni's life, women taught the Dharma, and some of them to numerous disciples. Afterward, the Mahayana asserted the total equality of women and men as far as Buddha's Dharma is concerned.

In China, there is a woman among the *shihō* transmitted by Bodhidharma. After that, we find sixteen awakened women during the Song dynasty: they were renowned abbesses of monasteries and convents, also teaching men who valued their wisdom and their realization.

In Japan, Master Dogen also put forward the role of the women. In the "*Shobogenzo Raihai Tokuzui*", he says: "*Why should the men be considered as superiors? Space is space, the four elements are the four elements, the five aggregates are the five aggregates, and women are such also*". After him, Keizan, who strongly supported the equality between women and men in Zen practice, had a Dharma heiress.

However, it is also necessary to take into account the fact that a great injustice was made to women in the transmission history, all lineages and the traditions taken together, and that this situation continues here or there ... To be a woman was often seen as a curse, the feminine body being - according to certain classic Buddhist texts - unfit for the achievement of the liberation. In some Buddhist cultures, the woman is seen as lustful, as a temptress, inferior

mentally and impure ... Painful echo of the fundamentalist and obscurantist theories stemming from other religions!

The place of the woman in the transmission and the practice of Buddha Dharma raise questions for all of us, men and women. If we speak only of masters, abbots and patriarchs, we can be led eventually to believe that the legitimacy of the Dharma transmission is exclusively male. And as far as Zen is concerned, we could consider that it is a "guys' thing", with - in the background - the deceptive image of the warrior of the Way who breaks his bones and shatters his marrow in the Gyogi's practice.

But the omnipresence of women in sanghas, dojos and temples, contributes to soften this image of the heroic male model, which is often translated in a kind of repression of emotions and the delicate feelings of our humanity. How many men and women did inflict themselves psychic and physical damages because of this erroneous image?

Emotions and human feelings are included in the field of our practice, they make its richness. Does not the soft firmness of our posture in zazen express the balance of the feminine and male energies at work, very visible when we drop the mask of our mental representations?

However, we should not think that chanting a Matriarchs list would be an act of Western modernity, trying to break with the tradition of an oriental "*macho*" Buddhism. As I said before, previously Dogen, Keizan and many others acknowledged the Matriarchs long before us, in India, China and Japan.

To tell the story of these exemplary women would be too long for this article. They all carried very high the virtues required for the practice of Buddha's Way, which we call the 6 *Paramita*: generosity, diligence, patience, ethic, concentration and wisdom. Beside the difficulties inherent to the real practice of the Buddha's Way, they had to deal with the additional difficulty of their women's status, in societies where the women held a subordinate role.

We can nevertheless distinguish, among all these nuns and these laywomen: Mahapajapati Gotami, founder of the sangha of the bikkhunis, Patavara Pancasata, great Vinaya teacher, Sanghamitta who transmitted the nuns order of India to Sri Lanka, Dhammadinna, great Buddhadharma teacher who gave the shiho to numerous disciples, Utpalavarna who symbolizes the salvific power of the kesa, Jingjian, the first known Buddhist nun in China, Zongchi (Jap. Soji Myoren), who received the shiho from Bodhidharma, Moshan Liaoran (Jap. Matsuzan Ryonen), first heiress of the Dharma in the Chan transmission, Miaohsin (Jap. Myoshin), quoted by Dogen in the "*Shobogenzo Raihai Tokuzui*", Daoshen, heiress of Fuyo Dokai who contributed to the revival of the Soto lineage Soto in China, Zenshin, first person (man or woman) of Japan to receive the Buddhist ordination, Komyo who contributed to the creation of the national system of Buddhist training monasteries for women, Tachibana Kachiko, considered as the first Zen disciple of Japan, Egi, sister of the Dharma of Koun Ejo, whom she helped a lot in the transition period, Mugai Nyodai, first feminine Zen master in Japan, Myosho Enkan, abbess of the first Soto temple for women, Konto Ekyu, first woman to receive from Keizan the complete shiho in the Soto Zen.

All this drove me to do some research and suggest a list of Zen Matriarchs, list we could chant every two days, alternately with the Patriarchs list.

To do it, I looked for lists of Matriarchs used by the North American sangha, who have been making in-depth researches since about fifteen years. I also consulted articles of Miriam Levering, Linda Lehrhaupt, Jade Reidy, Yoko Orimo, Alan Williams, Bernard Faure, Judy Roitman, William Bodiford and Grace Schireson, who studied in-depth the question.

I finally compiled a list of Matriarchs, by taking into account following principles:

- End with a list of 54 Matriarchs, to keep the harmony with the list of the Patriarchs.
- Keep the list of "Kako Shichibutsu" (the 6 anterior Buddhas plus Shakyamuni), because their perfect awakening places them beyond the duality man/woman
- Keep the most frequently quoted names by the American Sangha, while favouring the list of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association which was the result of a consensus between the different Sanghas.
- Stop the enumeration with the women contemporary of Keizan Jokin, as we do for the Patriarchs.
- Favour the names of women famous for their awakening, their wisdom, their compassion, their benevolence, as well as for the role they played in the transmission of Buddha's Dharma.
- Use whenever possible the Japanese transcription of the Chinese names.

I proposed therefore the following list:

Bibashi Butsu Daiocho
Shiki Butsu Daiocho
Bishafu Butsu Daiocho
Kuruson Butsu Daiocho
Kunagonmuni Butsu Daiocho
Shakamuni Butsu Daiocho
Mahamaya Daiocho
Ratnavati Daiocho
Srimala Daiocho
Prabhuta Daiocho
Mahapajapati Gotami Daiocho
KHEMA Daiocho
Sundarinanda Daiocho
Patacara Pancasata Daiocho
Bhadda Kundalakesa Daiocho
Sumana Daiocho
Kisagotami Daiocho
Dhamma Daiocho
Uppalavanna Daiocho
Bhadda Kaccana Daiocho
Soma Daiocho
Baddha Kapilani Daiocho
Singalaka Mata Daiocho
Samavati Daiocho

Sanghamitta Daiocho
Prasannasilla Daiocho
Dhammadinna Daiocho
Sukha Daiocho
Subha Daiocho
Utpalavarna Daiocho
Jingjian Daiocho
Soji Myoren Daiocho
Shiji Daiocho
Lingzhao Daiocho
Ling Xingpo Daiocho
Matsuzan Ryonen Daiocho
Ryu Tetsuma Daiocho
Myoshin Daiocho
Daoshen Daiocho
Huiguang Daiocho
Huiwen Daiocho
Fadeng Daiocho
Yu Daopo Daiocho
Mujaku Daiocho
Miaozong Daiocho
Qinguo Daiocho
Zhidong Daiocho
Wenzhao Daiocho
Zenshin Daiocho
Komyo Daiocho
Tachibana Kachiko Daiocho
Ryonen Daiocho
Shogaku Daiocho
Egi Daiocho
Mugai Nyodai Daiocho
Kakuzan Shido Daiocho
Ekan Daishi Daiocho
Mokufu Sonin Daiocho
Myosho Enkan Daiocho
Konto Ekyu Daiocho

Sangoku dento rekidai soshi
Narabini Somon Kodo Daiocho
Mokudo Taisen Daiocho

If you wish a more detailed study of the life of these women, you can contact me at the following address: francoisloiseau@orange.fr