
Bodaisatta Shishobo from Master Dogen

By Sergio Gurevich – gyoji weeks – March 2026

Bodaisatta means bodhisattva, *shi* means four, and *shobo* means the elements of social relationships.

A bodhisattva is someone who grounds his life in the practice of awakening alongside others, as he perceives his life to be interdependent and connected to all beings: living authentically, with less selfishness, and compassionate.

But in fact, these recommendations apply to the attitude in our life – for everyone, for each of us.

Practice brings positive changes in our behaviour, and behaviour in our relationships with others is of great value in Buddhism.

Dogen returned from China in 1227 and, a few years later, he founded the *Kosho-ji* temple in Kyoto. The social climate in Japan at that time was toxic. There were conflicts amongst the various Buddhist schools. Schools that might be described as 'popular' emerged in reaction to others that were more formalistic or so-called 'aristocratic'. There were even battles between monks.

To escape these conflicts, and under pressure from the Tendai temple *Enryaku-ji*, Dogen closed the temple and settled in the mountains of Echizen province, where he founded *Eiheiji* Temple, the Temple of Eternal Peace.

In 1243, he wrote the *Bodaisatta Shishobo*, a guide to dealing with difficult situations in everyday life.

He presents four ways of fostering social interaction. These ways of relating to others are practices designed to avoid conflict.

They are ways or actions through which we connect with others, means of creating relationships, and guidelines for living together. They can be understood as an embodiment of non-separation, a way of showing our compassion.

In English, we refer to '*embracing actions*': actions that embrace and intertwine our relationships.

These four *dharmas* are: **dana**, giving and generosity; **aigo**, kind words or words of love; **rigyo**, beneficial actions; and **doji**, cooperation.

These practices had already been described in a short sutra, the *Sangaha-sutra* – a title translated as '*The Foundation of Social Unity*' – which lays the foundations for living together harmoniously.

The first of these actions is:

Dana: giving, generosity

It is also the first of the six *paramitas*, and thus the first of the six practices of the bodhisattva.

Generally speaking, when we give, it is with a profit motive; we give in order to receive something in return.

Dana must be a *mushotoku* action, without thought of oneself. It is giving beyond one's ego.

Master Deshimaru said that it is giving without seeking gain, and that the deep intention is the only thing that matters.

One need only look at the generosity of the universe: the fruit on the trees, the coolness of the water in summer. They give without expecting anything in return.

For example, we give of our time to come to the dojo. We give our energy to the practice that we share with others, without expecting anything in return.

Giving is not an abstract concept. In practical terms, when we take the *genmai*, when we open the *oryoki* outwards we symbolise the act of giving, then we open the cloth inwards, symbolising that we are receiving. Because we give, we receive. This is the law of the universe, the law of the Dharma; we live by giving and receiving. We can give our attention, our friendship, food, alms, our smile, or simply our presence when we accompany someone through illness.

Dogen says: *'Dana is the opposite of greed, covetousness and the pursuit of favours. It is sharing what is most precious to us with a stranger. It is by acting in the spirit of sharing that we bring about peace in the world. We should show what is right, even to the powerful of this world. Offering a flower from a distant mountain to the Tathagata, just as sharing our wealth in this life—both spiritual and material—is worthy of esteem. '*

And he continues: *'We can show others what the true spirit of the Buddha's Way is and give them the opportunity to change by experiencing the practice, so that they may attain understanding. To act in this way is to take the first step towards the practice of sharing. It is for this reason that* fuse *stands at the head of the six paramitas. "*

Aigo: kind words or words of love

Dogen says: "*Speaking kindly arises from kindness of heart, and kindness of heart arises from the seed of a compassionate heart."*

He adds: *'Those who hear kind words will have a joyful expression and a cheerful spirit. Those who hear your kind words will be deeply moved and will always remember them. "*

These words should be used towards all beings. Whenever we meet someone, we should address them using words that do not cause harm, and not speak to them in an unpleasant manner.

In other words, one should consciously speak and act with compassion. This is not done with the idea that speaking kindly is morally correct, or to demonstrate that one is a good person.

However, using kind words does not mean flattering the other person. Nor is it about telling them what they want to hear, or saying things just to please them.

Sometimes we may need to use harsh or even painful words, but these must come from compassion – not to destroy the person, but to set them on the right path.

Let us not forget, too, to speak kindly to ourselves.

Here is what Dogen says: *'*Aigo *means that when we encounter sentient beings, our impulse of compassion naturally leads us to treat them with kindness. Aigo means that we treat all beings with care, as if they were our own children. Hearing kind words about ourselves brings us joy and happiness. We should realise that speaking truthfully is to express affection that springs from compassion. Such truthful speech has the power to change situations and has a positive impact on others. It is neither condescension, nor complacency, nor flattery. '*

***Rigyo*: beneficial actions, useful behaviour**

Dogen says: 'Rigyo *means being kind to people without distinction, regardless of whether they hold an important position or not. We should simply be this way, so that they too may develop this quality both now and in the future. "*

We must, whilst remaining alert, choose the actions and messages appropriate to each situation and in line with people's needs, and adjust our behaviour to suit the circumstances.

We help without expecting a reward; our only motivation is the beneficial action itself, the joy of helping others and bringing them well-being. It is a letting go of one's ego, without seeking personal gain.

To quote Dogen: *'Foolish people imagine that caring about the fate of others, that bringing benefit to others, is harmful to their own interests, that they will lose out, but this is not true. Beneficial actions are actions that include all beings, including oneself, for* rigyo *is the whole Dharma.*

Therefore, we should ensure that we treat our enemies, our friends and ourselves with respect.'

Skillful means, or *upaya*, teach us that carrying out successfully beneficial actions requires compassion, understanding, patience, adaptability, creativity and courage.

We might mention Avalokitesvara—Kannon in Japanese—the bodhisattva of compassion, who is depicted with a multitude of arms and hands, each hand bearing an eye, enabling him to see what is needed and to use the appropriate tools accordingly.

Dogen continues: *'If we are able to cultivate such an attitude, without ever relapsing or turning away, just as the grasses and trees, or the wind and rivers, never turn away and manifest the principle of beneficial actions…'*

This means that interaction with others through our beneficial actions is also beneficial in relation to nature and our environment.

Doji: cooperating, sharing the same goals

Master Deshimaru says that *doji* means seeking cooperation and harmony with others, and sharing goals.

Dogen says: 'Doji *means both behaviour and a dignified attitude, as well as harmony with oneself and with others. Consequently, others can be regarded as oneself, and subsequently, oneself as others. The relationship we have with others is infinite, just like our relationship with time.'*

One might say that it is sharing the same objective or benefit, both for the one who acts and for the one who receives the action: these actions are beneficial to others and to oneself. One does not distinguish oneself from others. One does not regard oneself as superior, nor others as superior beings.

One abolishes the idea of separation or inequality; one acts in mutual cooperation.

It is an awakening to non-separation from others and from oneself; this is what enables us to act.

We are in non-duality between ourselves and others because we are part of a whole.

One might take the example of a soloist in an orchestra. Each retains their own identity, yet interdependence allows them to act in harmony. In this interdependence, there is joy for the soloist and for the orchestra in playing together, but also joy for the audience.

Each of us is a buddha, and we act as equals within a profound interdependence. If I can help myself, I can also help others.

A poem written by Giun Zenji (1253–1333), the fifth abbot of Eiheiji, concerning the *Bodaisatta Shishobo*

The great gate of generosity stands open and
enriches the nine heavens;
Going beyond love and hatred expressed in language,
turns the wheel of the Dharma.
Beneficial actions to beings and the wind of cooperation
reach far beyond thousands of leagues.
For the rootless tree, the spring
of the four seasons has arrived.

The first three lines summarise the *Shishobo*. The bodhisattva's **practice of giving** enriches all beings, including himself. When we speak of **true words of love**, they transcend love and hatred; they set the wheels of the Dharma in motion. This is the compassion of Buddha.

The final sentence shows that *Shishobo* is the practice of vacuity that leads to eternal spring. The four seasons become timeless; everything is the spring of nirvana, the nirvana desired for all beings through *dana, aigo, rigyo and doji.*

Thus, our practice of zazen brings beauty and serenity to our lives.