

1 Introduction to Eihei Shingi

Eihei Shingi, Eihei's Pure Standards, is a collection of essays written by Eihei Dōgen (1200–1253), the founder of the Soto branch of Japanese Zen Buddhism. Unlike some of his other writings, more focused on philosophy and the nature of reality, *Eihei Shingi* is primarily a book about day-to-day monastic practice, specifying many rules, guidelines, and procedures. At the same time, this ritualized way of life is presented not as arbitrary minutiae but as an important part of religious practice, and many of these same practices are still carried out by monks in Japan and elsewhere today.

The essay this class is based on, “The Dharma for Taking Food”, was written in 1246. It's concerned with the proper procedure for breakfast and lunch meals at the monastery. (Dinner is not considered a formal meal, but informal “medicine” to keep the body functioning well.) It precisely specifies everything from the way to enter the hall to the way of laying out your bowls as a series of precise steps. This ritualized practice might seem extremely rigid to a secular modern reader, but mealtime is a part of a monk's practice just like sitting or walking meditation. Dōgen says “[F]ood is the dharma of all dharmas, which only a buddha together with a buddha can exhaustively penetrate. Just at such a time, there are the genuine marks, nature, substance, power, function, causes. and conditions. For this reason, dharma is itself food, food is itself dharma. This dharma is what is received and used by all buddhas in the past and future. This food is the fulfillment that is the joy of dharma and the delight of meditation.” Clearly, meals are a significant part of a monk's path towards enlightenment.

At the same time, the specific prohibitions Dōgen gives can be amusing for a modern reader. Admonitions to not let dandruff fall in your food or hide your food to get more suggest the image that monks would otherwise do so left to their own devices.

While it may not free you from the illusions of the world, I hope in this class to give you some sense about what life in a Kamakura Period Zen monastery might have been like.

2 Materials

- Four or five nesting bowls
- Bowl stand for largest bowl
- Wrapping cloth
- Bowl-wiping cloth (1.2 shaku (feet) long, a standard loom width)
- Lap cloth
- Place mat
- Utensil bag
- Spoon
- Chopsticks
- Cleaning stick

3 Procedure

3.1 Entering

- Signal sounds: night's end signal for breakfast, or three drum beats and a large bell for lunch.
- Monks wash hands and approach hall formally.
- Three roll-downs are sounded on the hanging wooden block.
- Monks enter hall silently in gasshō, starting with the left foot. When entering through the main entrance, ordinary monks enter the left

side; the abbot enters through the right side (or through the center starting with the right foot).¹

- Bow to Manjushri.
- Approach your seat.
- Bow to your seat, understood as a bow to those on each side, then turn clockwise and bow to the seat across from yours.
- Tuck your left sleeve under your arm with your right hand, and vice versa.
- Lift your the front of your okesa with both hands and hold it up in your left hand.
- Sit on the platform, leaving your slippers behind, while steadying yourself with your right hand. Sit with your left leg on your right thigh.²
- Spread the okesa to cover your knees without your robe showing, keeping a bowl's width between yourself and the jōen, the edge of the platform for bowls.
- The wooden fish is hit. After this point, latecomers are not allowed.

3.2 Setting Out Bowls

- The cloud-shaped gong in front of the kitchen is hit. Monks stand up, turn clockwise to face the back of the seat. Gasshō with your head in a slight bow. Hold your bowls in your left hand and unhook them with your right, then carry them with both hands at chest height. Turn, bend down and sit, placing your bowls behind your seat to the left, being mindful of your neighbors.
- A monk makes a meal offering to Manjushri, proceeding in gasshō in front of another monk carrying a tray of food. The monk presents the food, bows at the front of the bowing mat, uncovers the eight-sided block, returns to the bowing mat and bows.
- Three roll-downs on a drum; when the third is almost finished, the small bell in front of the hall is rung.
- The abbot enters, and the monks get down from their platforms. The abbot bows to Manjushri and the assembly, then sits; the monks then bow in the same way. The abbot's attendants bow; one brings a table, bows, and leaves. The abbot's bowls are placed on this table.
- Monks get back on the platform, leaving their slippers, and sit upright on zafus.
- Monks hold up bowls at face height then place them down in front of them.
- The supervisor enters, bows, offers incense to Manjushri, bows, goes in gasshō to the eight-sided block, bows, optionally hits it once.
- Gasshō.
- Untie the knot on the wrapping cloth.
- Fold the bowl-wiping cloth, once horizontally and into three layers vertically.
- Place the wiping cloth horizontally between yourself and the bowls and place the utensil bag above it.
- Place the lap cloth over your knees.
- Open the wrapping cloth, with the back corner out over the edge of the platform and the front corner folded partly under itself. Then the side corners should be folded under as far in as the bowl.
- With both hands, open the place mat. Hold the place mat in your right hand, lift the bowls with your left hand, set down the place mat on the wrapping cloth, and then set the bowls on it.
- Remove each bowl with both thumbs and set them out silently, starting with the smallest. (If your seat is a little too narrow, only put out

¹Monks entering through the back enter on the left or right and with their left or right foot based on where they're sitting.

²in the half-lotus position

three bowls.)

- Open the utensil bag and remove the chopsticks, then the spoon, placing them behind the bowls, points left.
- Take the cleaning stick and place it between the second and third bowls, handle away from you.
- Fold up the utensil bag and put it with the wiping cloth behind the bowls, under or behind the place mat.

3.3 Opening Recitations

- The supervisor hits the eight-sided block and says “Humbly we consider the three treasures, may they acknowledge us.”
- Monks gasshō and chant the Ten Names of Buddha (see texts).
- The eight-sided block is struck.
- The head monk chants the meal offering verse in gasshō, extending each tone.
- The junior monk who announces the meal enters and bows to Manjushri, the abbot, and then the head monk. He stands at the end of the platform by the left side of the entrance in shashu and announces the meal clearly.

3.4 Serving

- Servers offer food starting with the head monk and proceeding in order, ending with the abbot.
- Servers bow humbly.
- When serving soup or gruel, shake the ladle a few times and pause to avoid spilling, bending over and with your other hand against your chest.
- Servers should give each monk the amount of food they want.
- Monks should accept food respectfully, lifting their bowl with both hands and holding it low and level.
- Signal with your hand when you have enough food, not taking more than you will eat.
- When everyone has been served, the supervisor will hit the eight-sided block.
- Gasshō and bow to the food, then do the five contemplations.
- At lunch, take seven grains of rice with the thumb and first finger of your right hand and put them on the handle of your cleaning stick or the edge of your place mat as spirit offerings.³
- Gasshō and remain still.

3.5 Eating

- Eat with your spoon pointed straight into your mouth.⁴
- Fully appreciate and contemplate the dharma of the principle of the Way not to waste a single grain.

3.5.1 Breakfast

- Take your second bowl with your right hand and place it flat on your left hand, supported by bent fingertips.
- Use your spoon to scoop gruel from your largest bowl to your second bowl, then bring the second bowl near your mouth and eat with your spoon.
- Repeat this several times until the gruel is mostly gone.
- Return the second bowl, pick up the first bowl, and finish eating.
- Use the cleaning stick on the first bowl.
- Take the second bowl, eat the remaining gruel, and use the cleaning stick.

3.5.2 Lunch

- Raise the various bowls near your mouth to eat. Hold them with three fingers, thumb towards you and index and middle fingers away.
- If there are husks on your rice, remove them with your fingers before eating.

3.6 Cleanup

- Eat any remaining food in your bowls with the cleaning stick.
- Receive hot water in your largest bowl. Use the cleaning stick to clean it, turning the bowl clockwise.
- Pour the water into the second bowl. Turn the first bowl with the left hand, while washing it inside and out with the cleaning stick.
- Take the bowl in your left hand. Unfold the wiping cloth over the bowl and wipe and dry it, rotating it clockwise in both hands.
- Put the wiping cloth entirely into the bowl. Put the bowl on its stand.
- Wash the spoon and chopsticks in the second bowl and wipe them, keeping the wiping cloth in the largest bowl. Put them back in the utensil bag, spoon first, and place it horizontally between yourself and the bowls.
- Pick up the second bowl and cleaning stick with your left hand, move the third bowl to where the second bowl was, and pour the water into the third bowl. Wash the second bowl, wipe it dry, then put it in the first bowl with both thumbs.
- Repeat this to wash the third and fourth bowls.
- Dry the cleaning stick and put it in the utensil bag.
- Servers will bring buckets. Gasshō, then pour out your water into the bucket.
- Take the bowls with the left hand palm up and place them in the center of the wrapping cloth.
- With the right hand palm down, fold the place mat starting at the near edge and set it on top of the bowls.
- Fold the near corner of the wrapping cloth over the bowls, then the far corner.
- Put the lap cloth on top, then the utensil holder.
- Unfold the wiping cloth above the utensil holder.
- Tie the left and right corners of the wrapping cloth together such that both corners point to the right.
- Gasshō and sit silently.

3.7 Exiting

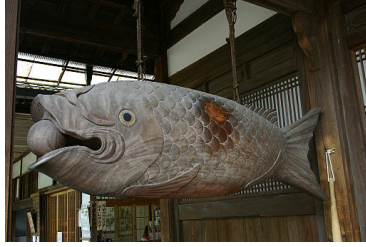
- Manjushri’s attendant gets down from his seat, bows, walks in gasshō to Manjushri and bows. Then he walks to the south of the incense stand, goes to the rear of the eight-sided block, and bows.
- He waits in shashu for everyone to finish wrapping their bowls, then hits the eight-sided block.
- He then gasshōs, covers the eight-sided block with its cloth, and bows.
- The supervisor chants “Existing in the World”.
- The abbot gets down while Manjushri’s attendant moves the eight-sided block behind Manjushri’s curtain. The abbot bows to Manjushri and leaves the hall.
- The monks all raise their bowls with both hands, then stand and turn. With the bowls in your left hand, hook them with your right hand. Then gasshō and turn to face forward.
- To get down from the platform, lower your feet deliberately, put on your sandals, and bow to your neighbors by bowing to your seat.
- Put your zafu under the platform.
- Leave the hall.

³If rice is not served, offer at most the size of half a large coin.

⁴We were told at the monastery that the spoon handle points directly towards Buddha.

4 Monks' Hall Layout

- A Abbot's seat
- B Bells (inner and outer hall)
- D Drum
- E Eight-sided block (Tsui chin; 槌砧)
- F Wooden fish (Mokugyō, 木魚, or Hou, 梆)
- H Hanging wooden block (Han; 版)
- M Manjushri, Bodhisattva of Wisdom
- R Bowing mat (Raiban; 礼盤)



A wooden fish
By sdkfz183, CC BY-SA 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

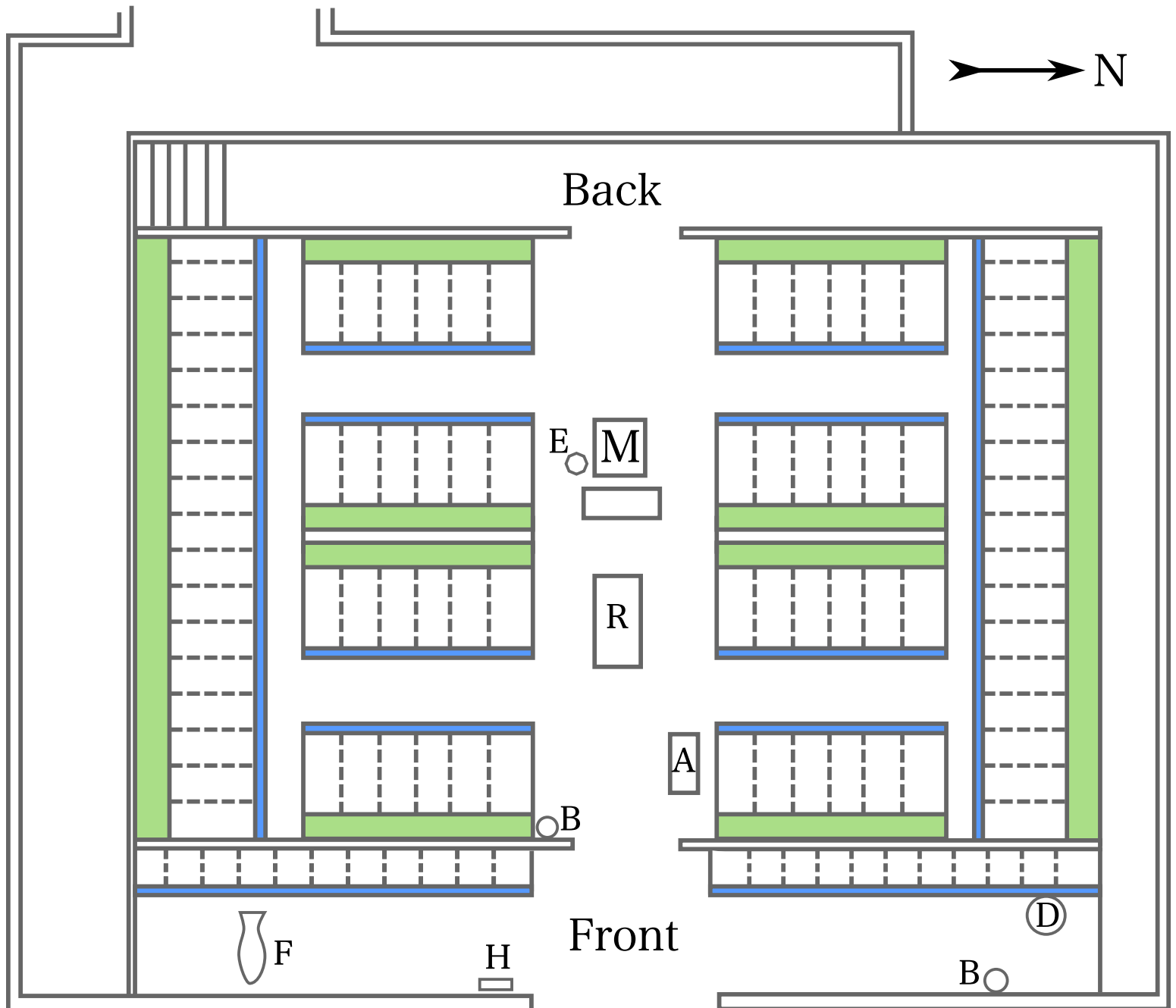


Manjushri
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Dōgen

Kanki (函櫃) are cabinets for personal possessions, including the hooks for bowls; they are in green. Jōen (牀縁), the platform edge where bowls are placed for eating, is in blue.



5 Terms

Abbot The Jūji (住持), the head priest of a temple or monastery.

Attendant A jisha (侍者), a senior monk with particular responsibilities.

Cloud-shaped gong A cloud-shaped gong, or unpan (雲版), is a metal gong hit with a wooden mallet.

Dharma Dharma is a Sanskrit word often translated as “teaching”, generally Buddhist teaching of perfect truth. It can also refer to the cosmic order or be used simply to refer to the way of doing something.

Gasshō (合掌) Hands together in front of face, fingertips even with the tip of your nose and move with your head as you incline or bow. Arms and elbows out.

Hatsu-u (鉢盂) A set of nesting bowls used for meals, in modern times called Ōryōki (応量器). Modern Sōtō Zen practitioners use up to 5 bowls, but Dōgen only mentions four bowls specifically. The largest bowl, called the zuhatsu (“head bowl”) and in modern English the “Buddha bowl”, has a round bottom and rests on a stand in the form of a small flat-bottomed bowl.

Manjushri Manjushri is a Bodhisattva associated with wisdom. A statue of Manjushri is given a central place in the Monks’ Hall.

Okesa (御袈裟) A monk’s over-robe, a formal garment sewed from strips, originally made from discarded rags dyed uniformly.

Roll-downs Three roll-downs, san’e (三会), is a standard signal in the monastery. It takes the form of 7 slow, evenly-spaced hits, a rapidly accelerating series of hits, 5 slow hits, an accelerating series, 3 slow hits, and then one more accelerating series.

Shashu (叉手) A ritual hand position when standing or walking in formal contexts. It can mean hands folded at chest height with forearms parallel to the floor or hands flat against the chest with thumbs interlaced.

Supervisor The Inō (維那), one of the six temple administrators that supervises the monks’ hall and the monks’ conduct.

Zafu (坐蒲) A sitting cushion used for meals and sitting meditation. The term is modern; Dōgen actually uses the word “futon”.



A cloud-shaped gong
By Terrie Miller, CC-BY-SA-2.0, via Wikimedia Commons



A Zafu
By Dharamweb, CC-BY-SA-3.0, via Wikimedia Commons

6 Texts

6.1 The Ten Names of Buddha

The pure Dharmakaya Vairochana Buddha,
the complete Sambhogakaya Rushana Buddha,
the ten trillion forms Nirmanakaya Shakyamuni Buddha,
the future Maitreya Buddha,
all buddhas, ten directions, three times,
the Mahayana, *Wondrous Dharma Lotus Flower Sutra*,
the great wisdom Manjushri Bodhisattva,
the Mahayana Samantabhadra Bodhisattva,
the great compassion Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva,
all venerable bodhisattva mahasattvas,
maha prajna paramita.

6.2 The Meal Offering Verse, Breakfast

The ten benefits of this morning meal
abundantly nourish practitioners
with unlimited rewards,
fulfilling eternal joy.

6.3 The Meal Offering Verse, Lunch

The three virtues and six tastes
we offer to buddha, sangha,
and all beings in the phenomenal world,
giving nourishment equally to everyone.

6.4 The Five Contemplations

First, regarding how great an effort [brought us this food]. we consider where it has come from.
Second, we reflect on whether our virtue and practice are worthy of receiving this offering.
Third, to protect the mind, abandoning our mistakes from greed, hate, and delusion is essential.
Fourth, truly this good medicine is for healing our fragile bodies.
Fifth, now we receive this food for the sake of accomplishing Buddha’s way.

6.5 Existing in the World⁵

Existing in the world like vast space, like a lotus flower not attached to water, the Mind’s purity goes beyond. We prostrate ourselves to the unsurpassed World-Honored One.

7 Meta

I am Kihō, a wandering poet who presently abides in the Barony of Carolingia. I may be contacted at kihoul@mit.edu. In these modern Middle Ages, I am not a monk or a serious Zen practitioner, so do not treat my perspective as authoritative on such matters. I was inspired to teach this class based on time I spent living briefly at a Soto Zen monastery in France. I have a blog where I discuss period Japan, <http://fireflies.xavid.us/>.

8 Source

Taigen Daniel Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, translators. *Dōgen’s Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of Eihei Shingi*. State University of New York Press, 1996.

⁵Not written out in the text