

Sutra Copying Practice
Shakyō

Village Zendo



Dotoku-ji
True Expression Temple

On the Practice of Shakyo (Tracing the Sutras)

Shotoshu

The Buddhist practice of Shakyo is a means of spreading the Buddha Way among people. It is also for praying for the fulfillment of one's greatest wish. But today, besides these overtly religious purposes, we can do shakyo in order to reflect on ourselves, or to attain mental well-being by mindfully tracing the sacred scriptures. It does not matter if one has faith in Buddhism or not, or if one's writing is good or not.

When we look back at the history of shakyo, we first find this passage in the Nihonshoki; "... gathering a group of transcribers, the Buddhist Tripitaka was transcribed at Kawaharaji temple¹ for the first time..." Later at the time of Emperor Shomu (701~756), specialists in sutra transcription were appointed and they transcribed the sutras to store or to distribute to Kokubunji temple in various locations. Then after around the Heian Period (794~1192) people started privately doing shakyo as a Buddhist practice, or as a prayer/wish for healing and consoling the souls of their ancestors. Thus, shakyo has a long history. Shakyo has been wonderful nourishment for many people to bring about peace of mind in their spiritual lives. It is so because when we do shakyo with harmonized body and mind, we are immediately in tune with Buddha's teaching. Shakyo has been a great spiritual support for way-seekers of all time. As people living in the present-day situation, we can cherish quiet and serene moments fostered by shakyo, and make this calligraphy as Zen to deeply look at the self an essential part of our everyday life.

The Heart Sutra is very short but it beautifully captures an outline of the Buddhadharma. Thus, we encourage beginners to start shakyo from this sutra.

Source: Sotoshu <https://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/eng/practice/sutra/shakyo.html>

SHAKYŌ

John Stevens

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, head temple of the Tendai sect on Mt. Hiei, a Nyohō Shakyō Kai (session) 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 shakyō, 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.

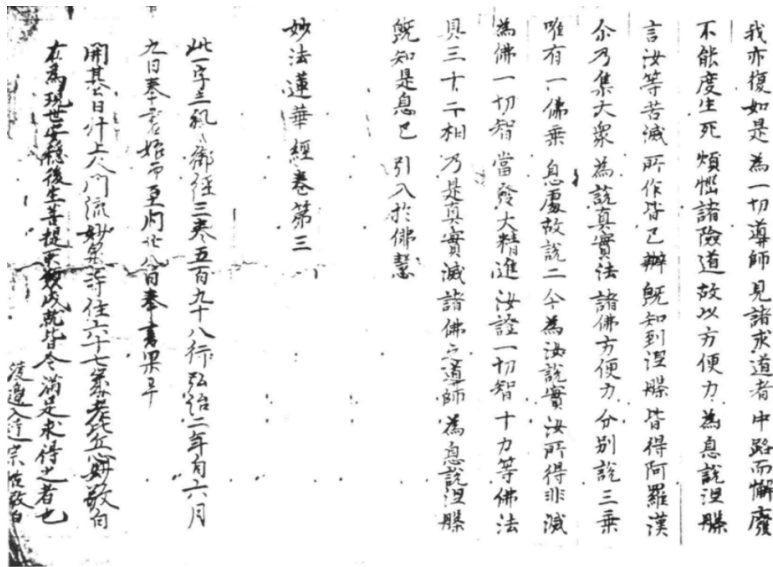
Work straight through without stopping. If a mistake is made (in shakyo a mistake is a sign of a lack of concentration) draw a single line through it (if writing in Chinese make a circle through the character); omitted characters should be written in the margin. Depending on the language and the script, 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. Not is shakyō necessarily limited to 'holy' texts; poetry or other forms of literature may also be copied with great spiritual benefit.



121. Each character of this shakyō was accompanied by three great prostrations. Muromachi period.



122. Heart Sūtra Seal in ancient script (tensho). Japan

Source: John Stevens, *Sacred Calligraphy of the East*, via *ZCLA Shakyō Manual*

Sutra Copying

Maezumi Roshi

What is the practice of copying sutras? The Lotus Sutra says repeatedly that those who copy it will by 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 blossoms and after that turns into seed. 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: "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 Tang Dynasty pronunciation instead of how we do it in Japanese, which is more like the Han Dynasty pronunciation.

So using the Tang 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 in finitely 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. By 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?

Source: Draft Edit of Teisho by Maezumi Roshi, reprinted in the *ZCLA Shakyō Manual*

One Word, One Buddha

John Stevens

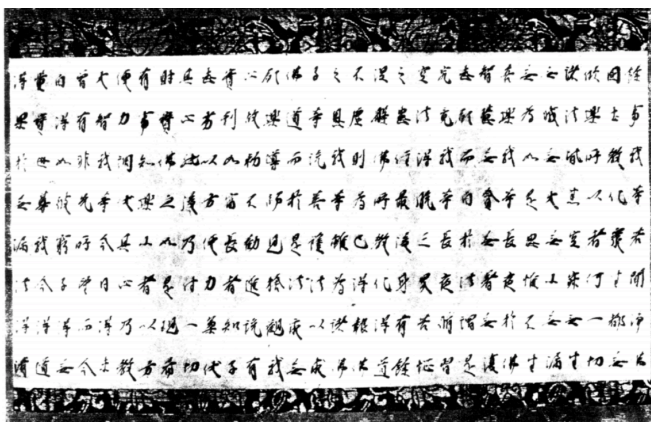
The five virtues of shakyō are:
Venerating the letters with your eyes
Keeping the letters in your heart
Chanting the letters with your mouth
Writing the letters with your hands
Becoming one with Buddha

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.



Source: John Stevens, *Sacred Calligraphy of the East*,

Hannya Shingyō

(with pronunciation and translation)

摩訶般波羅蜜多心經

Maka Hannya Haramita Shin Gyo

The Great Heart of Wisdom Sutra

觀自在菩薩行深般波羅蜜多時

Kan Ji Zai Bo Sa Gyo Jin Han-Nya Ha Ra Mi Ta Ji

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, doing deep Prajñā Paramita,

照見五蘊皆空度一切苦厄

Sho Ken Go On Kai Ku Do I Sai Ku Yaku

Clearly saw emptiness of all the five conditions

Thus completely relieving misfortune and pain.

舍利子色不異空

Sha Ri Shi Shiki Fu I Ku

O Shariputra, form is no other than emptiness,

空不異色

Ku Fu I Shiki

emptiness no other than form;

色即是空

Shiki Soku Ze Ku

Form is exactly emptiness,

空即是色

Ku Soku Ze Shiki

emptiness exactly form.

受想行識 亦復如是

Ju So Gyo Shiki Yaku Bu Nyo Ze

Sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness are likewise like this.

舍利子是諸法空相

Sha Ri Shi Ze Sho Ho Ku So

O Shariputra, all Dharmas are forms of emptiness:

不生不滅

Fu Sho Fu Metsu

Not born, not destroyed;

不垢不淨
Fu Ku Fu Jo
not stained, not pure,

不增不減
Fu Zo Fu Gen
without loss, without gain.

是故空中無色
Ze Ko Ku Chu Mu Shiki
So in emptiness there is no form,

無受想行識
Mu Ju So Gyo Shiki
no sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness.

無眼耳鼻舌身意
Mu Gen Ni Bi Ze Shin Ni
No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind;

無色声香味触法
Mu Shiki Sho Ko Mi Soku Ho
no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, phenomena.

無眼界乃至無意識界
Mu Gen Kai Nai Shi Mu I Shiki Kai
No realm of sight, no realm of consciousness,

無無明亦無無明尽
Mu Mu Myo Yaku Mu Mu Myo Jin
no ignorance and no end to ignorance,

乃至無老死亦無老死尽
Nai Shi Mu Ro Shi Yaku Mu Ro Shi Jin
No old age and death, and no end to old age and death,

無苦集滅道
Mu Ku Shu Metsu Do
No suffering, no cause of suffering, no extinguishing, no path,

無智亦無得
Mu Chi Yaku Mu Toku
no wisdom and no gain.

以無所得故
I Mu Sho Tok'ko
No gain and thus

菩提薩埵依般若波羅蜜多故
Bo Dai Sa Ta E Han-Nya Ha Ra Mi Ta Ko
the Bodhisattva lives Prajña Paramita

心無罣礙
Shin Mu Kei Ge
With no hindrance in the mind.

無罣礙故無有恐怖
Mu Kei Ge Ko Mu U Ku Fu
No hindrance, therefore no fear.

遠離一切顛倒無想
On Ri I Sai Ten Do Mu So
Far beyond deluded thoughts,

究竟涅槃
Ku Gyo Ne Han
this is Nirvana.

三世諸仏
San Ze Sho Butsu
All past, present and future Buddhas

依般若波羅蜜多故
E Han-Nya Ha Ra Mi Ta Ko
live Prajña Paramita

得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提
Toku A Noku Ta Ra San Myaku San Bo Dai
And therefore attain Anuttara-Samyak-Sambodhi.

故知般若波羅蜜多
Ko Chi Han-Nya Ha Ra Mi Ta
Therefore know Prajña Paramita

是大神呪
Ze Dai Jin Shu
is the great mantra,

是大明呪
Ze Dai Myo Shu
The vivid mantra,

是無上呪
Ze Mu Jo Shu
the best mantra,

是無等等呪
Ze Mu To Do Shu
the unsurpassable mantra

能除一切苦真實不虛
No Jo I Sai Ku Shin Jitsu Fu Ko
It completely clears all pain. This is the truth not a lie.

故說般若波羅蜜多呪
Ko Setsu Han-Nya Ha Ra Mi Ta Shu
So set forth the Prajña Paramita mantra,

即說呪曰
Soku Setsu Shu Watsu
Set forth this mantra and say:

揭諦揭諦波羅揭諦
Gya Tei Gya Tei Ha Ra Gya Tei
Gate Gate Paragate!

波羅僧揭諦菩提薩婆訶
Hara So Gya Tei Bo Ji Sowa Ka
Parasamgate! Bodhi Svaha!

般波心經
Han-Nya Shin Gyo
Prajña Heart Sutra.

Source: adapted from <http://shugendo.org/content/hannya-shingyō---heart-sutra> (no longer online) using VZ Sutra book pronunciations and translation.

Maha Prajña Paramita Heart Sutra

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, doing deep Prajña Paramita,
Clearly saw emptiness of all the five conditions
Thus completely relieving misfortune and pain.
O Shariputra, form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form;
Form is exactly emptiness, emptiness exactly form.
Sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness are likewise like this.
O Shariputra, all Dharmas are forms of emptiness:
Not born, not destroyed; not stained, not pure, without loss, without gain.
So in emptiness there is no form, no sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness.
No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, phenomena.
No realm of sight, no realm of consciousness, no ignorance and no end to ignorance,
No old age and death, and no end to old age and death,
No suffering, no cause of suffering, no extinguishing, no path, no wisdom and no gain.
No gain and thus the Bodhisattva lives Prajña Paramita.
With no hindrance in the mind. No hindrance, therefore no fear.
Far beyond deluded thoughts, this is Nirvana.
All past, present and future Buddhas live Prajña Paramita
And therefore attain Anuttara-Samyak-Sambodhi.
Therefore know Prajña Paramita is the great mantra,
The vivid mantra, the best mantra, the unsurpassable mantra
It completely clears all pain. This is the truth not a lie.
So set forth the Prajña Paramita mantra,
Set forth this mantra and say:

Gate Gate Paragate! Parasamgate! Bodhi Svaha! Prajña Heart Sutra.

Customary Refrain

All Buddhas throughout space and time
All Bodhisattva Mahasattvas
Maha Prajña Paramita

The Four Great Vows

Sentient beings are numberless, I vow to save them.
Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to put an end to them.
The Dharmas are boundless, I vow to master them.
The Buddha Way is unattainable, I vow to attain it.

Verse of the Kesa

Vast is the robe of liberation,
A formless field of benefaction.
I wear the Tathagata teaching,
Saving all sentient beings.

Gatha on Opening the Sutra

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

Verse of Atonement

All evil karma ever committed by me since of old,
On account of my beginningless greed, anger and ignorance,
Born of my body, mouth and thought,
Now I atone for it all.

Evening Gatha

Let me respectfully remind you:
Life and death are of supreme importance. Time swiftly passes by and opportunity
is lost. Each of us should strive to awaken...
Awaken! Take heed.
Do not squander your life.

Sho Sai Myo Kichijo Dharani (Auspicious Dharani For Averting Calamity)

(Chant 3 times)

No Mo San Man Da Moto Nan Oha Ra Chi Koto Sha Sono Nan To Ji To En Gya Gya Gya Ki Gya
Ki Un Nun Shiu Ra Shiu Ra Hara Shiu Ra Hara Shiu Ra Chishu Sa Chishu Sa Chishu Ri Chishu
Ri Sowa Ja Sowa Ja Sen Chi Gya Shiri E Somo Ko

En Mei Jukku Kannon Gyo

(Chant 3 times)

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 Buddha
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.