

On the Tenzo Kyokun, part 2

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Stepping back, as a rhetorician I am always curious about where these kinds of texts come from, and how they are used. Why did Dogen write Instructions to the Cook, and why was it the very first piece in his *Ehei Shingi*, Rules for Monastic Living? What is he trying to do with this piece of writing?

I think we actually need to go back to China to begin to appreciate what Dogen offers in Tenzo Kyokun. In our own culture and time we can hardly imagine what it was like to live in a culture in which widespread famine periodically wiped out as much as two-thirds of the entire population. You can get some sense of it if you look around this room and imagine that only 7 people would be left. And then the next round of famine and plenty would begin. Because of our fortunate abundance and overabundance of food that has been the experience of most of our lives it is almost inconceivable what it must have been like.

Because the Chinese had no culture of begging monks as in India, Zen monasteries in China had to find ways to be self-supporting: farming, timber, big colorful ceremonies, rich patrons. They had to find ways to feed the monks even in hard times. Desperate parents would send their sons to the monastery just so that they could survive. Monks had to earn their keep through hard physical labor; even then, there were no guarantees there would be food enough to get through the harsh winters. And of course, in the winter, everyone needs more calories to stay alive. There was no central heat, the monks sat zazen in frigid great halls, worked in the cold, and wrapped their grateful hands around a cup of hot tea.

It was of paramount importance to fiercely steward the food supply, to carefully portion amounts, to mindfully prepare the food, and to offer it to the community. There is research showing that in this country somewhere between 30-50% of all food is wasted. In those harsh conditions in ancient China, there was no waste. Every scrap of food was put to use. If the rice was burned, they ate burned rice. There was no compost because everything that would be composted went into the soup.

When Dogen went to China he was fascinated by every aspect of monastic living, but he was particularly struck by the Tenzos he encountered. We'll study some of the stories

about his encounters in a few days. As he traveled, Dogen thought deeply about how monastic communities are nourished.

When he decided to found his own Zen school, when he began to write his own rules for monastic community, he drew on the regulations crafted by the Chinese in the Chanyuan Quinggui. He wrote a book called Eihei Shingi, usually translated as Dogen's Pure Standards for Monastic Living. Every monk entering Dogen's monastery received a copy of this book. The Tenzo Kyokun is the very first piece in it. So why didn't he just write a memo to the Tenzo and let it be handed down to each new tenzo? If they are instructions to the cook, why not just give them to the cook?

Dogen recognized that the Tenzo was a pivotal figure in the health and well-being of the monastic community, and its ability to practice deeply together. But the Tenzo Kyokun is not merely celebrating the importance of that role. It is instructing the whole community. It makes explicit the profound care that is being taken to nourish and sustain them, the enormous effort and attention that is required, the skill and dedication and deep practice. In this way, Dogen helps the community appreciate the profound offering of food and drink as a spiritual practice. He forestalls the inevitable tendency to criticize or complain about the food so common in social groups. He warns against the kinds of pranks young monks might dream up to mess with the food supply. You've probably all seen the harrowing surveillance videos of young people working in fast food kitchens.

Here he creates a context for appreciating the Tenzo's efforts and receiving the offering with gratitude, while simultaneously instructing the Tenzo to be present, to be taking care and paying fierce attention to every detail.

This section of the Tenzo Kyokun describes a day in the life of a tenzo. Yet it is curious because it is not really a "how-to" set of instructions or procedures that a tenzo could follow step by step. It cuts back and forth in time, and even though rich in concrete particulars, is clearly missing important steps and processes. So let's take a look and see if we can discover some of the layers of meaning here. The tenzo's day begins the day before. Your work begins even before the start of your work day, isn't this true? There is everything that has to be in place in order for you to begin to work. So how does the work begin for the tenzo? In our individualistic culture, we might expect that the tenzo would work out a menu and get the supplies she needs, then assign assistants to do the prep work, and then she would supervise a bit while doing something else. That is our conventional model.

Mind you, the menus were not complex. Three bowls. Rice in one of them. Vegetables and tofu in another one, and perhaps a soup or pickles in the third one. Breakfast doesn't usually differ from lunch. There was no supper. How complicated could it be?

So how does the tenzo actually begin? Meeting with the temple officers to get the ingredients for the meals. This is a meeting of peers: the *tsusu* and *kansu*, in charge of the overall affairs of the community, the *fusu*, in charge of financial and clerical details, the *ino*, in charge of personal affairs within the community, the *shissui*, in charge of building repairs, farming, and other maintenance, and the *tenzo*, in charge of meals and food supplies.

The food is received from the trustees of the community in other words, not just purchased at the store by the tenzo. So there is this caution: *"Use the property and possessions of the community as carefully as if they were your own eyes."* The tenzo should handle all food he receives with respect, as if it were to be used in a meal for the emperor.

Note that by providing the Tenzo Kyokun to every single monk, that means that the tenzo is also accountable in a very public way. Anyone may observe whether he is abiding by these instructions. We should consider this whole teaching very carefully as we shove our carts through the crowded aisles of Whole Foods or Central Market. Who will notice if we mindlessly throw food into our carts, if we buy more than we need, if we throw away an avocado with a brown spot, or leave a tomato to go bad on the counter? Who are we accountable to in the way the Tenzo is accountable to the whole monastery?

The tenzo must accept the food supplies he is given, work with whatever that is, somehow feed the whole community two meals from it. If the food is scarce, everyone will go hungry; when food is plentiful, the tenzo must still make proper use of it with no waste. When I was working in the kitchen at Great Vow, the bounty of kale from the organic garden became a real problem.

Now that the food has been supplied, does the tenzo sit down and work out the menu based on these ingredients? No. The officers meet in the kitchen and decide together with the tenzo what food is to be prepared for the following day, right down to the seasonings. Do you see how each role in the community is interwoven with each other role in this way? It is so unlike our Western notions of roles as independent and separate, each with its own turf and its own responsibilities and its own boundaries.

This is truly shared responsibility and care. Once the menus are decided, they are made public, posted where the community can see them.

Only then can meal preparations for the next day's meals begin. Here Dogen makes a point that is so important that he repeats it three times: you must do this work with your own hands, even the mundane work of rinsing the rice or washing vegetables. What is he expressing here? The tenzo is not a remote executive in an office, or a supervisor of others, but is intimately involved at the heart of the preparations. Dogen is saying no aspect of the work is beneath the tenzo, nothing should escape his attention and care. But he is also speaking to everyone in the community: *Put your whole attention into the work, seeing just what the situation calls for. Do not be absent-minded in your activities, nor so absorbed in one aspect of a matter that you fail to see its other aspects. Do not overlook one drop in the ocean of virtue [by entrusting the work to others]. Cultivate a spirit which strives to increase the source of goodness upon the mountain of goodness.*

Does this have any relevance for our lives, here in the 21st century, in Austin Texas, with our casual abundance and laid back attitudes about almost everything, with our microwaves and toaster ovens, our upscale supermarkets and boutique bakeries? Or should we just throw another slab of ribs on the grill and knock back a beer?

When washing the rice, remove any sand you find. In doing so, do not lose even one grain of rice. When you look at the rice see the sand at the same time; when you look at the sand see also the rice. Examine both carefully. In those early days, before factory production of rice cleaned and polished it and removed most of the nutrition, washing the rice was necessary. So what does this mean to us, shaking our clean white rice out of a box? Maybe there is something else being spoken of here. Something about seeing, about perceiving, about the quality of attention to just what is in front of you. Do you see the rice or do you see the sand? Can you see them both equally? *Then a meal containing the six flavors and the three qualities will come together naturally.*

In this very short text of 17 pages he is going to devote at least two of them to rice, sand, and water. So here are the steps for cooking rice:

1. wash the rice
2. put it into a pot with water
3. cook until done

There is a little teaching story: what is that all about? Dongshan Liangjie is one of the great Zen ancestors. Xuefeng was the tenzo, so already a very accomplished

practitioner. Dongshan passes by and asks a question that seems casual, another Zen hook: Do you wash the sand and pick out the rice, or wash the rice and pick out the sand?

How would you answer such a question? What is Dongshan actually referring to? Good thoughts vs. bad thoughts, wisdom vs. ignorance, right vs. wrong?

Xuefeng's response is "I wash and throw away both the sand and rice together." Snappy "Zen" retort. But Zen is not about being clever or nonsensical or cheeky. So Dongshan says, "Then what on earth do the residents here eat?" Your answer must be spontaneous, unprecedented, but also utterly practical. Xuefeng turns over the rice bucket.

Now you know just what an incredible sacrilege that would be, right? The enormous provocation of it!

Dongshan said, "The day will come when you will practice under another master." How even-tempered and clear! It is neither shaming nor blaming; it is not approving or judging in any way.

The footnote here says that "Dongshan is not questioning the act of turning over the pot as an expression of Xuefeng's understanding. It is simply that for Dongshan the act was a bit overdramatic. Xuefeng did eventually study under another master, Deshan who was famous for his more demonstrative approach. Later on these differences in style led to the dual flowering of the Rinzaï and Soto schools."

Dogen, like teachers everywhere bemoans the present day practitioners and holds up the glories of the past: *In this same way, the greatest teachers from earliest times who were settled in the Way have carried out their work with their own hands. How are we inexperienced practitioners of today able to remain so negligent in our practice! those who have come before us have said, "The Way-Seeking Mind of a tenzo is actualized by rolling up your sleeves."*

This isn't about taking on every task and overwhelming yourself. But it is about fidelity to the work in front of you, paying close attention and not distancing yourself from the real work to be done. Our lives now are complex, we can't actually carry out all of the tasks that support our existence, but we can begin to be aware of the work we feel is beneath us, the way we slide away from the things we don't want to face or take care of, the way we let others shoulder the responsibility and the actual work. It might be a committee

where you don't engage the discussion, leaving others to make the decisions. It might be dropping your problems in the lap of a therapist, hoping for a fix somehow. All of us have these little areas of willful inattention or refusal to take up what needs to be done. That is what Dogen is pointing to here, and in his repeated instruction to "carry out work with your own hands."

Even in the next paragraph he repeats it, as though he has not already covered the sand in the rice issue. *In order not to lose any of the rice when picking out the sand, do it carefully with your own hands.*

The repetition is significant. I thought when I read this section well, *who else's hands could I possibly use but my own?* So to be absolutely clear about this, he quotes from the Chinese Chanyuan Quingui, *"Pay full attention to your work in preparing the meal; attend to every aspect yourself so that it will naturally turn out well."*

Things turn out well *naturally* when we devote our attention to the work; this is the message.

Meanwhile, we are not yet through washing the rice:

Next, *you should not carelessly throw away the water that remains after washing the rice. Again, things were much better in the past: In olden times a cloth bag was used to filter out the water when it was thrown away.*

A ridiculous amount of fussiness, it seems, until you realize that we are presently in a drought and using reclaimed water even to take care of the golf course across the street. More and more people are looking to waste water, filtering and treating it so that it can be re-used.

Now at last you can put the rice in a pot. But wait, it still needs to be carefully attended to so no accidental mice can fall into it, or person "drifting through" the kitchen to poke around in it. I think in the monastery full of young men there might have been plenty of opportunities for pranks such as dropping a mouse in the rice pot or poking around in the kitchen. This is a warning not only to the tenzo, but to those young monks not to mess with the food supply.

Meanwhile, in our own times, when you are working, have you noticed the tendency for the mouse called Facebook or email to fall into your pot, or people texting you poking around in what you are doing? Is it only me?

So the tenzo must guard against mishaps while also, now, preparing the vegetables and cleaning up the rice and soup from today's meal. What? Shouldn't the cleanup crew take care of all that? The tenzo should be able to rest now, right?

Conscientiously wash out the rice container and the soup pot, along with any other utensils that were used. This is our practice of "leave no trace." Everything should be restored for the next meal. Do we do this in our everyday work? Most people either leave the cleanup to others or hastily toss things into the sink. Dogen is teaching much more than cooking here:

Put those things that naturally go on a high place onto a high place, and those that would be most stable on a low place onto a low place; things that naturally belong on a high place settle best on a high place, while those which belong on a low place find their greatest stability there. Why is this idea repeated? What "things" do you think Dogen is talking about here? What does this mean for you? What things in your life naturally belong on a high place and which are more stable on a low place?

Meanwhile, clean the chopsticks, ladles, and other utensils; handle them with equal care and awareness, putting everything back where it naturally belongs. Keep your mind on your work and do not throw things around carelessly. Well, of course not! Everybody knows this, right?

Meanwhile, it's now time to prepare the noon meal. Guess what happens next? *Check to see if there are any insects, peas, rice bran, or tiny stones in the rice, and if so, carefully winnow them out.* Again with the rice!

When the tenzo receives the food from the kusu (temple officers), he must never complain about its quality or quantity, but always handle everything with the greatest care and attention.

Is this what we do when we receive the ingredients we will be working with, and the tasks we need to do? Possibly not. However, *Nothing could be worse than to complain about too much or too little of something, or of inferior quality.*

Being tenzo is not a part-time job, where you do a bit of cooking and spend the rest of your time in zazen:

Both day and night allow all things to come into and reside within your mind. Allow your mind (Self) and all things to function together as a whole.

This, of course, is a classic instruction both for meditation and living.

So, in case you thought you were going to finally get a bit of rest once you turn in for the night:

Before midnight, direct your attention to organizing the following day's work; after midnight begin preparations for the morning meal.

So after the morning meal, wash the pots and cook the rice and soup for the noon meal. Guess what, we are going to talk about the rice again:

When soaking the rice and measuring the water, the tenzo should be present at the sink.

Keep your eyes open. Do not allow even one grain of rice to be lost. Wash the rice thoroughly, put it in the pot, light the fire, and cook it.

What on earth is Dogen getting at, and why is he so emphatic about it that he has to repeat it so many times?

There is an old saying that goes, "see the pot as your own head; see the water as your lifeblood."

What does this mean to you? It's not merely pots and pans or running water that we treat with such disregard or carelessness. We might say, see your car as your own head; see the gas as your lifeblood. Or see the computer as your own head; see the emails as your lifeblood. Or what else?

Transfer the cooked rice into a bamboo basket in summer or a wooden container in winter, and then set it on the table. Cook the rice, soup, and any side dish at the same time.

Do what is appropriate to the season and to the meal. Bring the meal together so that everything is completed in coordination. This is echoed in the definition of enlightenment as an appropriate response. What you offer is nourishing, heartening, and supports the whole community in its practice path, so that we may be strong and healthy in offering ourselves wholeheartedly to the world.

Finally, Dogen laments the trend toward using assistants, and reminds the tenzo (and the community) that despite this unfortunate slippage, the tenzo is still responsible for the work, and the assistants cannot be held responsible.

You can see why the role of tenzo in monastic living was only given to senior practitioners who could handle such profound responsibilities and scope of work. They would have served many years as assistants to the tenzo before rising to this position. In many monasteries the tenzo is nearly as important and powerful a figure as the abbot. In the next section of the text, that Flint will talk about tomorrow, Dogen describes the qualities of such a person.

But I wanted to share with you a little about my own experiences as a tenzo, a role I first had at AZC and much later in my training at Great Vow. I've been cooking since I was 8 years old, though not with the care and precision Dogen calls for. Then my mother remarried the director of food service at Beloit College, and I worked in the kitchen with him and his 89-year old Danish father, who had been trained on Danish cruise ships. That is where I learned to cook in large quantities (200 students in the dorms) and observed what it meant to cook at that scale with consummate skill. Every morning Jake's Dad would begin by baking several dozen loaves of bread, pumpnickel rye, whole wheat, sourdough, then he would start on the homemade pies: blueberry, apple, cherry, pecan. After that, it was on to the soups, of which there would be a variety: hearty vegetable, mushroom and onion, chicken and rice, tomato bisque. Finally, it would be time to begin the breakfast of pancakes, eggs, bacon, sausage, home fried potatoes. You get the idea. It was quite a production, and I served a solid apprenticeship there. But there we were working in a huge institutional kitchen, with all the equipment, supplies, provisions, and resources we needed. Final exam week Jake would make surf and turf for 200 students to fortify them. Needless to say, we were not minding every grain of rice, but we were quite careful in a professional way, with all of the food.

Fast forward to sesshins at AZC, and my training there in a kitchen a tiny fraction of that huge college arena. I remember particularly being tenzo for a sesshin with Reb Anderson. The Zendo was packed; I can't even remember how many people. I was terribly ill with a sinus infection that came on suddenly, and I had not been given any assistants. It was a five-day sesshin, and I wasn't sure I would be able to survive it. Three meals a day plus cookies and tea treats! I had not studied the Tenzo Kyokun, hadn't even heard of it at that point, so it was basic survival, just trying to get through the day. It did not feel at all spiritual, but purely physical and mental in the way of

running a marathon. Periodically, the teacher would walk through the kitchen and say, “put some turmeric in that, it gives it a lovely color.” I was too weak to throw the knife I was holding or right now I would be mouldering away in some prison cell.

I knew from visiting Great Vow just what the setup was; in fact, on my first visit I had been put to work in the kitchen there. As I was slicing peaches, the abbot, Hogen passed through the kitchen and said to the tenzo, nodding at me, “She knows what she is doing.” Not long after, I found myself back at Great Vow for my priest training period.

It was great fortune that Hogen and Chozen found that abandoned school and were able to talk the town into selling it to them for almost no interest. Although it had been abandoned, the enormous institutional kitchen was still in great shape, with its huge walk in refrigerator and freezer, separate dish room, and vast cafeteria. Most importantly, the kitchen was the warmest place in the whole monastery. The furnace had broken in the residents’ dorm, and Chozen much preferred to keep the windows open in the Zendo. It was 20° inside and out most of the time I was there.

At Great Vow, Zen students are rotated through the key roles one or two years at a time, to give them experience in many positions: running the organic garden, the workshop, housekeeping, managing the office. The young woman who was tenzo and I became good friends. But she detested food, could not stand to see or hear people eating, had no instincts for putting ingredients together or for cooking. The results were so painfully obvious. Gradually I was assigned to help her more and more in the kitchen. And when she went to Germany for six weeks, I became the tenzo. I was elated, because that kitchen was a fantastic playground. And, I was not given a restrictive budget. Every day we had the harvest of the organic garden that must be used. What I did have was the preparation of the regular three meals a day for residents plus tea, several large sesshins, three or four workshops, and a huge weekend memorial for Maezumi roshi that brought 23 of his dharma heirs to Great Vow. I can attest to the need for care and attention to detail that Dogen talks about here, for the qualities of steadiness, maturity in practice, and equanimity.

Maybe you will never find yourself in such a position, but most likely you too will find yourself at some point juggling responsibilities and competing time demands, distractions and sand in the rice. You will have to take care of things with your own hands to ensure that they are properly done. Most likely you *will* be in a position where your actions, decisions, care, and efforts will affect a larger community, even if only your

family. You may recognize situations that are critical, where your performance really matters. That is when you will realize the profound teaching of the Tenzo Kyokun.