

The return to Dōgen and the resumption of  
Shōbōgenzō studies in the Edo period

*Directives to Sōtō*  
*Buddhist Institutions*

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# Directives to Sōtō Buddhist Institutions

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all translations by Duncan R. Williams

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Directive for the Sōtō Sect (Sōtōshū hatto 曹洞宗法度, 1612)

- (1) A priest who has not completed thirty years of priestly training cannot become a resident temple abbot (hōdō 法幢).
- (2) A priest must have completed twenty years of priestly training before serving as a training retreat head (gōkogashira 江湖頭).
- (3) : Temples should not allow monks and nuns, who were expelled from a different temple for committing transgressions, to come into residence.
- (4) To receive a colored robe (ten'e 轉衣), a priest must have spent five years from the time served as a training retreat head without having committed any offenses.
- (5) All branch temples must obey the decisions and rules set out by their head temple.

Anyone who does not follow the above rules will be expelled from the temple grounds (tsuihō jichū 追放寺中).

The twenty-eighth of the Fifth Month, Keichō 17 (1612)

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Regulations for Eihei Temple (Eihei shohatto 永平寺諸法度, 1615)

- (1) After one has undergone priestly training for twenty years and served as the training retreat head, if another five years goes by and one wishes to apply for a higher ranking colored robe, one should bring to the mountain [Eihei Temple] a letter of recommendation from one's Dharma transmission master. Our temple will hand the request to the Densō 傳奏 [the office for requests to the imperial household] and an imperial order (rinji 綸旨) proclaiming the promotion and permission to wear the higher ranking colored robe will be announced if the application is successful. As a further note, to become a resident temple abbot, one must have had thirty years of priestly training.



- (2) For the purposes of counting one's years of training from the time of the promotion, the day on which the request was received (by the imperial household) should be regarded as the starting point.
- (3) Only those who have received imperial permission to serve as the abbot of Eiheiji or Sōjiji, may don a purple robe. Further, the purple robe may not be worn at any other temple than the two temples and should not be worn after one has been transferred to a different temple.
- (4) On the founder's (Dōgen's) annual memorial day, all branch temple [abbots] in Echizen Province must, without exception, come and attend the ceremonies. Temple [abbots] in regions further out should also consider attending.
- (5) All priests in the Japanese Sōtō lineage must follow the above rules in accordance with the traditions of this temple (Eiheiji) [tōji no kakun 當寺之家訓].

Addendum: Finally, the above regulations have not been strictly followed recently. There has been talk of monks wearing purple and yellow robes without authorization. Violations of the Buddhist law like this leads to ridicule from the people and is an insult to the Dharma way. The above regulations have been settled on to spread the Buddha Dharma and the sect. Any monk breaking these rules will be sent into exile.

Seventh Month of Genna 1 (1615), [Seal of Ieyasu]

p. 28 [explanation of the above regulations by Duncan Williams]

The rules also regulated and standardized the priestly hierarchy, which, in the medieval period, tended to be determined according to factional (monpa) traditions or regional customs. The basic career of a priest can be laid out as follows:

The first twenty years of priestly training: The priest was to diligently pursue Buddhist training, which would officially begin at the time he received the tonsure. This training involved participating in a number of summer and winter retreats (gōko), so that after twenty years, it would be possible to be the head retreat leader (gōkogashira).

The twenty-fifth year: The earliest possible time that the priest could petition to be granted a higher rank in the priesthood, which involved a change in the color of the priestly robe (ten'e). This request would only be considered if the priest had done nothing improper for five years following a term as a head retreat leader.

The thirtieth year: The earliest possible time the priest could obtain permission to become a resident abbot (hōdō) of a Sōtō Zen temple. The priest would, in some sense, "own" the rights of abbotship to that temple and have the right to take on disciples, so such a privilege came only thirty years after receiving the tonsure.



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This government-regulated standard career path of a Sōtō Zen priest, from novice to temple abbot, meant that even if a priest was ordained at age thirteen (which, according to a different piece of legislation, was the earliest one could receive the tonsure) and everything went smoothly, the youngest age that a priest could become a temple abbot was forty-three. . . . While this effort to standardize the Sōtō Zen priestly career steps crossed factional and regional boundaries, loopholes or other ways to evade the actual steps required for priestly advancement, for example, by bribing the head temples and the administrators in Kyoto, became routine. This is not particularly surprising given that there were over 17,000 Sōtō Zen temples that needed priests to serve them and if every priest actually followed the regulations before serving as abbot, it would have been impossible to maintain the sect's temples. However, these first directives issued by the bakufu did represent the initial attempt by the new regime, with the help of cooperative head temples, to institute a new early modern form of Sōtō Zen Buddhism based on new authority structures.

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