

## On Washing Yourself Clean

(*Senjō*)

**Translator’s Introduction:** On the surface, *Senjō* contains Dōgen’s instructions to his monks on the monastic procedures for dealing with the act of relieving nature. On a deeper level, it is a detailed analysis of how a monk is to practice mindfulness at every stage in the process of handling that most physical and mundane of activities, one that humans too often treat with disgust or think of as not having any spiritual relevance. On a deeper level still, it reveals how attending to the mundane can function as a spiritual cleansing.

The tone of the original is difficult to reproduce in English without misleading the reader. Much of it is written in what might be called Japanese cookbook style. That is, the instructions are often expressed as though addressed impersonally. For example, a rather literal rendering of a particular phrase would be “Next, one washes one’s hands,” which in English cookbook style would appear as “Next, wash your hands.” The latter, however, may sound in the present context like an injunction or rigid command, a laying down of the rules. In this translation, I have tried to find a middle path between the rather stilted, impersonal ‘one’ and the raw command of the imperative, and have therefore chosen the simple instructional style, “Next, you wash your hands.” Only on occasion does Dōgen use a form that is herein rendered as “You should,” and even more rarely one that is a negative command, “Do not.”

In historical terms, Dōgen’s instructions represent the most advanced ideas of personal hygiene for his times, even though today some of them might be considered unsanitary. Had he lived in the present, undoubtedly his instructions would take into account the principles of modern-day hygiene. It is quite likely that his views were influenced by his Chinese Master Tendō Nyojō, who, as a novice, had requested to be appointed as Head of Purification (that is, the monk in charge of the lavatories) for his monastery, and he was later allowed to take on this responsibility.

The realization of enlightenment through practice, which the Buddhas and Ancestors have protected and preserved, has been described by Them as ‘being freed from stain’.

The Sixth Ancestor Enō once asked his disciple Nangaku Ejō of Kannon-in Temple, “Looking back, do you think that what we do has always been based on realizing enlightenment through practice?”

Nangaku responded, “It is not that realizing enlightenment by means of practice has not existed in the past, but should someone act in a way that is stained, then he will not realize it.”

Enō said, “It is this ‘being freed from stain’ that all Buddhas have preserved in Their hearts and kept in mind. You have done this, as have I, as have our Indian Ancestral Masters.”



It says the following in the *Great Scripture on the Three Thousand Forms of Everyday Behavior for Monks*, “Purifying the body refers to cleansing yourself of its excretions and keeping your nails clipped.” Therefore, even though our bodies and minds are unstained, there is a method for cleansing the body, which is also a method for cleansing the mind. Not only will it purify body and mind, it will also purify those in our nation and those who train ‘under a tree’. Even though no one in our nation has ever yet been sullied by the dust of existence, purifying is what all Buddhas keep in mind. Upon reaching the fruits of Buddhahood, They do not neglect or discontinue Their cleansing. The meaning of this is impossible to fully fathom. Proper decorum is one thing that is meant by it, and realizing the Way through ordination is one form of proper decorum.



A verse in the “Pure Deeds” chapter of the *Avatamsaka Scripture* says:

*Whilst relieving nature,  
By all means pray that all sentient beings  
Will eliminate their impurities  
By completely ridding themselves of lust, anger, and  
delusion.*

*Whilst washing up afterwards,  
By all means pray that all sentient beings  
May turn towards the Peerless Way  
And leave worldly things behind them.*

*Whilst cleaning off the soil with water,  
By all means pray that all sentient beings  
Will avail themselves of purifying patience,  
That they may, after all, be free from any defilement.*

Water is not necessarily ‘fundamentally pure’ nor is it ‘fundamentally impure’: the body is not necessarily ‘fundamentally pure’ nor is it ‘fundamentally impure’—so

it is with all things. This does not mean that water is or is not something sentient; it does not mean that the body is or is not something sentient—again, so it is with all things. This is what the World-honored Buddha gave voice to. Even so, it is not water that makes our bodies clean: relying on the Buddha’s Dharma and keeping to the Buddha’s Dharma is what ‘washing yourself clean’ really means. This Dharma is the very being and spirit of what the Buddhas and Ancestors have personally and correctly Transmitted; It is the very words and phrases used to describe That which the Buddhas and Ancestors directly experienced; It is the very Light in which the Buddhas and Ancestors clearly abide and to which They hold. In sum, It is an immeasurable, unbounded, meritorious virtue which They make manifest before our very eyes. When, at the right moment, They supply the forms for training body and mind, They fully provide the basic elements of conduct, which are timeless. As a result, what we call ‘the mind and body of one who is training’ naturally manifests.



You should keep the nails on your ten fingers clipped. Whereas ‘ten fingers’ is a reference to the fingernails of both your hands, right and left, you should likewise clip your toenails. It says in the Scriptures that we are doing wrong if we let our nails be longer than an eighth of an inch.<sup>1</sup> So, you should not let your nails grow long like non-Buddhist old-timers do, and you should take care to clip your nails. In present-day Sung China, there were those fellows within our monastic family who lacked an eye for the way to train and let their nails grow very long. On some, they were one or two inches long, and on some, even as long as three or four inches.<sup>2</sup> This is counter to the Teachings and is neither the flesh nor the spirit of the Buddha’s Dharma. They acted like this because they did not maintain the customs or practice of the Buddha’s family. Among the venerable Elders who have held to the Way, such behavior is not to be found.

Similarly, there were some of my fellow monks who let their hair grow. This is also counter to the Teachings. Do not make the mistake of thinking that this may be in accord with the True Teaching just because some say that monks in a great and powerful country do it.

- 
1. The inch referred to here is about forty percent longer than an English inch. Hence, the recommended length, in Western terms, would be just under three-sixteenths of an inch. Similar computations should be made for later references to lengths in inches or feet.
  2. It was a long-established custom in China, particularly among the Confucianist public officials, to let their nails grow as long as possible as a sign that they did not engage in menial labor, which they considered demeaning.

My former Master, a venerable Buddha, had the following words of instruction for any monks in the Greater Sangha who sported long hair or nails,<sup>3</sup> “It is neither lay folk nor monks who do not understand the practice of our shaving our heads—it is animals. Who among the Buddhas and Ancestors of the past failed to shave Their heads? If any of you fail to grasp why you should shave your head, you are truly an animal through and through.” After instructing his community in this way, many of my fellow monks who had not shaved their heads for years did so. Whether giving a Dharma talk in the Meditation Hall or speaking informally to his monks, he would snap his fingers loudly while pointing in rebuke, saying something to the effect of:

For what reason I know not, you have rashly let your hair and nails grow long. How pitiful that you have let the human body and mind which you have received fall into aimless ways. For the past two or three hundred years, the Way of the Ancestors has been in decline, so that fellows like you are many indeed. Such persons have sometimes become heads of temples, and have even received titles of respect from emperors, whilst making a pretense of spiritually leading others—what a misfortune for both human and celestial beings alike! Now, in all the mountain temples here in China, people with hearts intent on the Way are all disappearing, and those who would gain the Path have long been dying out. Only hooligans remain!

When my Master spoke in this manner, those from various places who had imprudently been given the title of Elder did not grumble about this, nor did they offer any defense either.<sup>4</sup>

You should realize that long hair on a monk is something that the Buddhas and Ancestors remonstrated against and that growing long nails was something that non-Buddhists practiced. The descendants of Buddhas and Ancestors should not take delight in these sorts of practices, which are contrary to the Dharma. You should keep yourself pure in body and mind, and keep yourself clean by seeing that you trim your nails and shave the hair off your head.



Do not neglect to wash after relieving nature. Shariputra once brought about the conversion of a non-Buddhist by means of this Teaching. Although it was not

- 
3. ‘The Greater Sangha’ refers here not only to the monks in Tendō Nyōjō’s monastery but also to any other monks who might come to visit.
  4. The term ‘Elder’ generally refers to someone who has been a monk for ten years or more.

something that the non-Buddhist originally expected, nor was it something that Shariputra had consciously intended, even so, when the forms of dignified behavior of the Buddhas and Ancestors are kept before one's eyes, false teachings are spontaneously humbled.<sup>5</sup>

When doing your training under a tree in the forest or out in the open, you will not find a privy already built. So, using water from some convenient valley stream or river, clean yourself off with sand. Since you do not have any ashes at this time to cleanse yourself with, simply use two sets of seven balls of sandy soil. The way to use these fourteen balls is as follows: after having removed your robe, folded it, and put it aside, you take soil that is sandy [rather than dark earth], shape it into balls about the size of a large soybean, and place these atop a stone or some other convenient place, with two rows of seven balls each. Then, provide yourself with some pebbles that can be used for scouring your hands. After that, you relieve yourself. After you have finished relieving yourself, use a wooden or bamboo toilet spatula, or some paper, to clean yourself off. You then go to the edge of the water to wash. Make sure to take three of the balls with you to clean yourself. Put one of the balls in the palm of your hand, add just a little water, mix the ingredients together until their consistency is thinner than mud and quite soupy, and begin by cleaning off your genitals. Then take another sand ball and, preparing it as before, clean off your buttocks. Again, prepare a sand ball as before and, in the same manner, clean off your hands.<sup>6</sup>



After monks began to reside in temple quarters, they constructed a building that they referred to as 'the Eastern Quarters'. Sometimes it was called a water closet and at other times a lavatory. It is absolutely essential to have a lavatory in a place where a family of monks resides.

When going to the Eastern Quarters, you should be sure to take a hand towel with you. The way to do this is to fold the hand towel in half and put it over your left shoulder, letting it hang down over the sleeve of your gown. When you have

- 
5. The reference to Shariputra and the non-Buddhist may be to an incident recorded in the *Code of Behavior for Members of the Greater Sangha*, where a non-Buddhist was converted to Buddhism out of admiration and respect for Shariputra's scrupulous observance of the code of monastic decorum, which the man had observed whilst the monk was on his alms rounds. Shariputra was one of the two chief disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha.
  6. Dōgen does not specifically indicate how the remaining eleven balls are to be used, but considering how he uses numbers in other discourses, it is likely that he means, "If you need more than three, well, you have them right at hand."

arrived at the Eastern Quarters, you should hang your towel over the clean-clothes pole. Hang it in the same way it was when it was hanging on your shoulder. If you come wearing a nine- or seven-striped kesa,\* you should be sure to hang it next to your towel. You should hang it so that it will not fall off. Do not hastily toss it over the pole.

You should be sure to pay particular attention to the name marker. The name marker is for putting your name on the pole. Write your name on a piece of white paper in the shape of a full moon and then align this marker on the rack. We use a name marker so that we will not forget where we have put our robe. When our monks come in numbers, we must be sure not to confuse our place on the rack with that of others.

If a number of monks come and line up at this time, make shashu\* and bow in greeting to the others. When bowing in greeting, you need not bow deeply: simply hold your hands in shashu before your chest and bow in recognition of the others. When in the Eastern Quarters, we acknowledge the monks assembled by bowing to them even when we are not in our robes. If your two hands are not occupied or you are not carrying something in them, you should keep them in shashu and bow.

If one of your hands is already occupied, or when you are carrying something in one hand, you should make your bow with a one-handed gasshō.\* In bowing with a one-handed gasshō, the hand is raised, with the fingers slightly cupped as if you were going to use the hand to scoop up water; the head is lowered slightly, as in greeting. When another monk behaves in this way towards us, we should behave similarly: when we behave in this way, the other monk should do likewise.

The procedure for taking off your undershirt and outer robe is to remove your robe along with the undershirt by bringing the two sleeves together in back, putting the two arm holes together, and lifting up the sleeves. You then fold the two sleeves, one atop the other, over the garment. Next, with the left hand, grasp the back of the collars and, with the right hand, draw up the robe and fold it down the middle of the sleeve bags<sup>7</sup> and the two collars. Having folded over the two sleeves and collars, you again fold the robe in two, lengthwise, and drape it over the pole with the collars on the far side; the skirt of the robe and the sleeve cuffs hang on the near side of the pole. That is to say, the robe hangs at the waist over the pole.

---

\* See *Glossary*.

7. On some monastic robes, the sleeves are quite full, forming a bag-like appendage.

Next, avoid mistaking whose towel is whose when there are two poles and two towels are hanging one in front of the other. So that your towel does not get separated from your robe or get taken by someone who has not hung up a towel, tie it down by wrapping it around your robe two or three times and tying it, without letting your robe fall onto the ground. Then, facing your robe, you make gasshō.

Next, you take a sash cord and hang it over your shoulders.<sup>8</sup> Then go to the wash stand and fill a clean bucket with water; carrying the bucket with your right hand, go into a toilet stall. In putting water in the bucket, do not fill it to the brim, but fill it up nine-tenths of the way.

When you reach the lavatory door, you should change your slippers. Put on a pair of rush slippers, leaving your own slippers by the front of the lavatory door. This is what is meant by ‘changing slippers’.



It says in the *Procedures for Cleanliness in a Zen Temple*, “When you need to go to the Eastern Quarters, by all means anticipate this need. Deal with it in time, so that you do not hurry from urgency. Give yourself time to fold your kesa, and leave it on your table in the Monks’ Quarters or on the clean pole in the lavatory.”

Upon entering the toilet stall, close the door with your left hand. You next pour just a little water from your bucket into the toilet basin. Next, put the bucket in front of you in the place provided for it. Then, while standing, face the basin and snap your fingers three times. Whilst snapping your fingers, your left hand is held in a fist at your left side at waist level. Next, you lift and gather up your under-skirt by its corners, face the door and, straddling the basin between your feet, squat down and relieve yourself. Do not soil either side of your garments; do not let them get stained front or back. During this time, you should remain silent. Do not talk or joke with the person in the next stall, chant, sing, or recite anything aloud. Do not spit or blow mucus from your nose onto the area around you. Do not strain or make grunting sounds excessively. You should not write on the walls. Do not dig at or draw on the ground with your toilet spatula; it should be used for cleaning yourself after you have evacuated your bowels. Also, if you use paper, you should not use old paper or paper with characters written on it.

You should keep in mind the difference between a clean spatula and a soiled one. The spatula is eight inches long, triangular in shape. In thickness, it is the width of one’s thumb. Some are lacquered, others are not. Put your soiled spatula

---

8. A sash cord is used to tie clothes out of the way.

in the used spatula box. Clean ones will already be in the spatula stand. The spatula stand is kept near the sign in front of the toilet basin.

After using a spatula or paper, the way you clean yourself is as follows: hold the bucket in your right hand and moisten your left hand well. Then, cupping some water in your left hand, you first clean off your genitals three times. Then, you wash your buttocks. This is the way you should clean yourself.

Do not tip the bucket roughly, spilling the water into your hand and quickly using it all up.

After you have finished cleaning yourself, put the bucket down in its proper place; then, take the used spatula and wipe it clean and dry with paper. You should wipe your genitals and buttocks dry. Next, adjust your under-skirt and robe with your right hand, and, also with your right hand, pick up the bucket. Then go out the door, take off the rush slippers, and put on your own. Next, you return to the wash stand and put the bucket in its original place.

Next, you should wash your hands. With your right hand you take a spoonful of ashes, place it atop some pebbles, drip some water on them, and wash your contacting hand with your right hand,<sup>9</sup> using the pebbles to scour it, just as though you were cleaning rust off a sword. You should wash with ashes in this manner three times. Then, you should take some sand, add some water, and wash three times. Next, take some cleansing powder made from ground orange seeds in your right hand, moisten it with water from the small bucket, and wash by rubbing your hands together. The washing should be done thoroughly, even up your forearms. You should wholeheartedly devote your attention to washing in a conscientious manner. Ashes thrice, sand thrice, and cleansing powder once—all together seven times, an appropriate number. Next, you wash in a large bucket. This time, you simply wash in cold or warm water, without using any cleanser, sand, or ashes. After washing once, transfer that water into the small bucket, put in fresh water, and rinse both hands. In the *Avatamsaka Scripture*, a verse says:

*When washing your hands,  
By all means pray that all sentient beings  
May acquire the finest hands  
With which to receive the Buddha's Teachings.*

When you use a water ladle, you should, of course, hold it with your right hand. When using it, do so quietly, without making a great noise with bucket or ladle.

---

9. In India, China, and Japan, it was customary to use the left hand to clean oneself after relieving oneself. As this hand might well become soiled through this contact, it was called, literally, 'the contacting hand'.

Do not splash water about, scatter the cleansing powder, or get the area around the water stand wet. That is to say, do not be hasty or careless: do not be disorderly with things or treat them roughly.

Next, you dry your hands with the towel for general use or dry them with your own towel. Once you have finished drying your hands, go to where your robe is hanging over the pole, undo the sash cord, and hang the cord over the pole. Next, hang your towel over your left shoulder and rub some incense on yourself. There is rubbing incense for general use. It is made of fragrant wood in the shape of small vials. The size of each is about the thickness of a thumb and four times that amount in length. You take a piece of string about a foot long and thread it through the holes that are bored in each end of the incense stick. This is hung over the pole. When you rub it between the palms of your hands, the fragrance of this incense will naturally impregnate your hands.

When you hang your sash cord over the pole, do not hang it over another one so that they become entangled, and do not leave it in a disorderly fashion.



When matters are handled in this way, everything will be a purified Buddha Land, a Buddha World well adorned. You should do everything with care, without a lapse: you should not act from haste, as though in a dither. Do not entertain the thought, “If I hurry, I can get back to what I was doing.” You should keep in mind the principle that, when you go to the Eastern Quarters, the Buddha’s Dharma is not something to be talked about, but lived.



Do not stare at the faces of monks coming and going.



In cleansing yourself whilst in the lavatory, it is fine to use cool water, since it is said that hot water may cause diarrhea. Using warm water to wash your hands will not prove disturbing to your health. A kettle has been provided for heating water to wash your hands with.

Concerning the duties of the monk in charge of the lavatory, it says in the *Procedures for Cleanliness in a Zen Temple*, “Later in the evening, see that water is heated and oil is put out for the night lamp. Always make sure that there is someone to take over the boiling of the water, and do not let the community do it with a discriminatory attitude.” From this it is clear that both hot and cold water are used.

If the interior of the lavatory becomes dirty, you should screen off the entry door and hang the sign that says ‘Dirty’ on it. If a bucket is accidentally knocked over, you should screen off the entry door and hang up the ‘Spilled Bucket’ sign. Do not enter the building when such signs have been put up.

Even though you may have already entered a stall, if there is someone else who snaps his fingers to let you know of his presence, you should leave shortly.



In the *Procedures for Cleanliness in a Zen Temple* it says, “If you do not wash yourself clean, you cannot truly take a seat in the Meditation Hall or bow to the Triple Treasure. Also, you cannot accept bows from others.” And in the *Great Scripture on the Three Thousand Forms of Everyday Behavior for Monks* it says, “If you do not clean yourself after relieving nature, you are committing an offensive act.<sup>10</sup> You cannot truly sit upon a monk’s pure cushion, nor can you truly pay homage to the Triple Treasure. Although you may bow, you will have neither happiness nor merit from doing so.”

On the basis of these quotations, you should put this matter foremost when you are training in the temple. How can we possibly not want to pay homage to the Triple Treasure, nor to accept the respectful bows of others, nor to bow to them in return? The training halls of the Buddhas and Ancestors undoubtedly had these forms for dignified behavior. Those in the training halls of the Buddhas and Ancestors undoubtedly implemented these forms for dignified behavior. These are not things we force ourselves to do, for they are the words and deeds that arise naturally from the forms of dignified behavior. They are the constant conduct of all Buddhas and the everyday behavior of all Ancestors. And such forms are not limited just to the Buddhas of this world: they are the conduct of Buddhas in all ten directions. They are the conduct of Buddhas in both the Pure Lands and in the besmirched realms of existence. Those folks who are poorly informed fancy that the Buddhas have no forms of dignified behavior for using the lavatory, or they imagine that the forms of dignified behavior for the Buddhas in this world of ordinary beings are not the same as those for the Buddhas in the Pure Lands, but this is not what ‘learning the Way of the Buddhas’ means. You should realize that ‘purity and stain’ is clotted blood that has trickled from a corpse: one minute warm, the next minute horribly cold.<sup>11</sup>

---

10. An ‘offensive act’ is a technical term that refers to the category of least serious breaches of monastic conduct.

11. This is Dōgen’s image for a distinction that once was considered the lifeblood of practice

In the fourteenth section of the *Ten Procedures to Be Recited* it says:

When Rahula, the Buddha's son, was a novice, he took to spending his nights in the Buddha's lavatory. The Buddha, fully aware of what His son was doing, patted Rahula on the head with His right hand and recited this verse:

*My son, it was not to be poor or in want,  
Nor to rid yourself of fortune or position,  
But simply to seek the Way that you left home,  
Which will surely bring hardships enough to bear.*

So, you see, the Buddha's temple had its lavatory too. The form for dignified behavior in the Buddha's lavatory was to wash oneself clean, and the Ancestors, in turn, passed this on to us. The conduct of the Buddhas has still been preserved: to follow the ancient ways is a great joy and something indeed hard to come by. Further, thankfully, the Tathagata gave voice to the Dharma for Rahula whilst in the lavatory. The lavatory was a place fit for the Buddha to turn the Wheel of the Dharma. How to conduct oneself in that training place of the Way is what the Buddhas and Ancestors truly Transmitted.



In the thirty-fourth chapter of the *Code of Behavior for Members of the Greater Sangha* it says, "The lavatory is not to be placed in the east or the north; it should be situated in the south or the west. Urinals should also be located in this manner." We should go by the directions given here as the proper ones. This is the plan for all the training halls in both China and India, and was actually the way the Tathagata erected them. You should realize that this was not just this one Buddha's way of doing things. It applied to the temples and training halls of the Seven Buddhas,\* as well as to the temples and training halls of all the Buddhas. Shakyamuni was not the first to do this; it has been the dignified conduct of all Buddhas. Mistakes will be many, should someone set up a temple or monastery without first understanding this and then attempt to do the practice and training. Such a person will not have prepared for a Buddha's dignified conduct, and the enlightenment of Buddha will not yet have manifested before his very eyes. If you would construct a training hall and establish a temple or a monastery, you will have to do it in accordance with the methods and procedures directly passed on by the

---

but which has become frozen and dead through viewing the matter from a discriminatory and judgmental perspective.

Buddhas and Ancestors. Because this is the true Transmission of true heirs, merit and virtues will more and more accumulate. If you are not an heir to the true Transmission of the Buddhas and Ancestors, you do not yet know the Body and Mind of the Buddha's Teachings. If you do not know the Body and Mind of the Buddha's Teachings, you will be unable to clarify what a monk's Buddhist activities are. Now, 'the Great Teacher Shakyamuni Buddha's Teachings being Transmitted throughout the ten quarters' means the Buddha's Body and Mind being made manifest before our very eyes. A proper time for manifesting the Buddha's Body and Mind is when we act in accordance with what has been said here.

*This was delivered to the monks at Kannondōri in Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple, Uji Prefecture, Yamashiro Province, on the twenty-third day of the tenth lunar month in the first year of the En'ō era (November 21, 1239).*