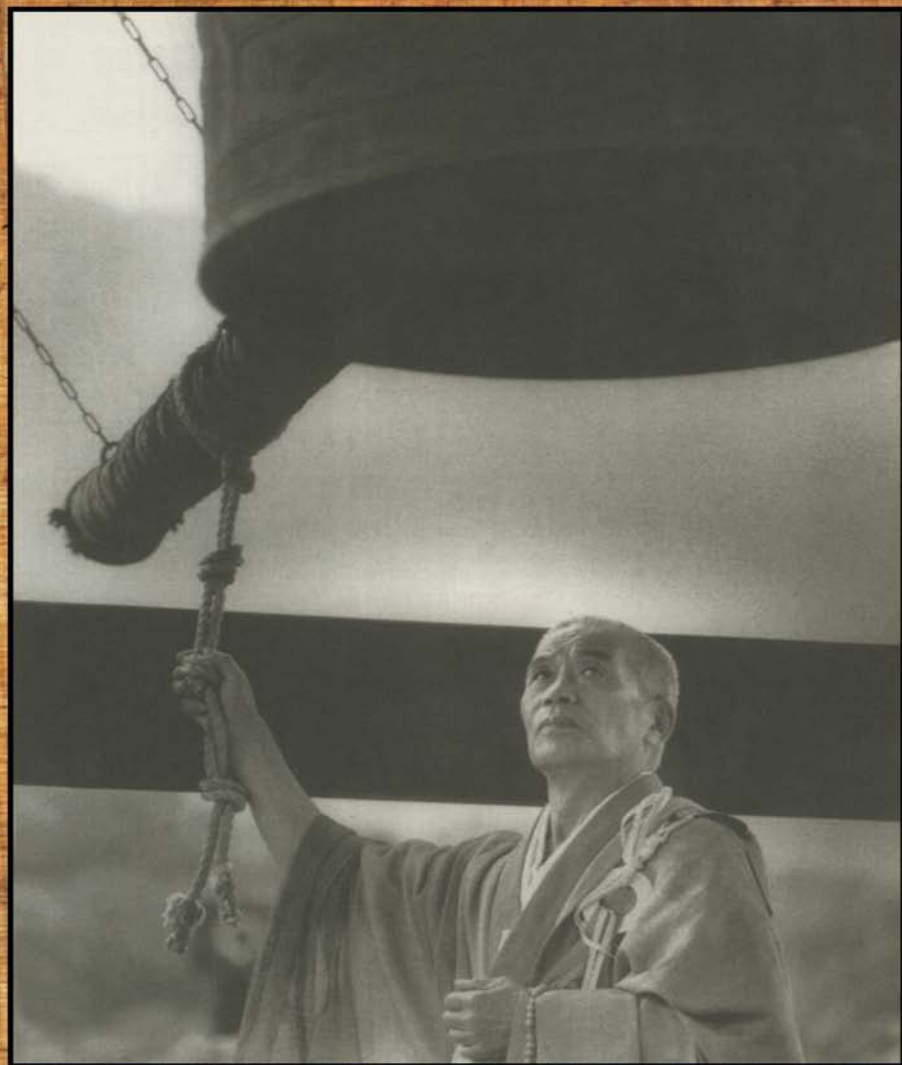


Omori Sogen

The Art of a Zen Master



Hosokawa Dogen

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Omori Roshi and the ogane (large temple bell) at Daihonzan Chozen-ji, Honolulu, 1982.

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Dedicated to my parents

Contents

Acknowledgements	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	<i>x</i>
Part I - The Life of Omori Sogen	
Chapter 1 <i>Shugyo</i> : 1904–1934	3
Chapter 2 <i>Renma</i> : 1934–1945	39
Chapter 3 <i>Gogo no Shugyo</i> : 1945–1994	55
Part II - The Three Ways	
Chapter 4 Zen and <i>Budo</i>	101
Chapter 5 Practical Zen	115
Chapter 6 <i>Teisho</i> : The World of the Absolute Present	139
Chapter 7 Zen and the Fine Arts	153
Appendices	
Books by Omori Sogen	164
Endnotes	166
Index	171

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It has been 9 years since I came to Chozen-ji, the temple founded in Hawaii by Omori Roshi to transmit his line of Zen to the West. During this time, Tanouye Tenshin Rotaishi, Archbishop of Daihonzan Chozen-ji, has guided me and supervised all aspects of this book.

Hosokawa Dogen
Honolulu, Hawaii
Spring, 1996

Introduction

In the contemporary Japanese Zen world, there is one man who stands at the top of the mountain. He had a unique way of teaching Zen. His background as an expert in *Kendo* (the Way of the sword) and *Shodo* (the Way of the brush), as a political activist, scholar, and university president is totally different from other Zen masters. Yet outside Japan few would recognize the name of Omori Sogen. Though he has written a great number of books and articles, many have been lost and only a few excerpts from them have been translated into English by Trevor Leggett. I believe that if the story of his life and a part of his teachings were published in English, it would greatly help those who train in Zen in the West.

Although I have known Omori Roshi for over 20 years and re-read much of his writings in preparation for writing this book, I must acknowledge that there are many people in Japan who may be better suited to write this book. I undertook this task only to introduce Omori Roshi to the West with the hope that this book will be like sweet water to one who is thirsty.

I met Omori Sogen Roshi in 1973 during the Rohatsu Dai Sesshin when I was the head monk of Tenryu-ji. Hirata Seiko Roshi, then the Abbot and now the Archbishop, summoned me to receive a donation from a Zen priest. Hirata Roshi told me to thank the man for the donation. Without thinking, I said, "Thank you very much. I know that I am being rude, but may I ask your name?"

He immediately replied, "Omori from Tokyo."

By then I had met many Zen priests so I was very familiar with the kind of energy and presence that they possessed. Omori Roshi,

however, was different from all others. I was struck by the strength and blackness of his eyes. The energy emanating from his small five feet two inch frame did not belong to the world of priests. It was so powerful that I could not go close to him. I accepted the donation, and as is the Japanese custom, I accompanied him to the monastery gate. The monastery gate was more than 12 feet tall, yet it seemed very small as Omori Roshi passed through it. He seemed to fill the space like a mountain gliding slowly and regally on a cloud.

A year and a half later in the early autumn of 1975, I entered Seitai-ji International Zen Monastery where Omori Roshi was then the Abbot. I trained there with him for a year and a half. For the next 6 years, despite getting married and succeeding my father as the resident priest of Zuiko-ji in a rural part of Japan, I continued my *koan* training with Omori Roshi. In 1983 he decided my *koan* training was finished and bestowed upon me *inka shomei* (Dharma mind-stamp) and told me, "Please carry on after me."

Without hesitation, I replied, "Yes." These words are deeply inscribed in my heart and weigh heavily on my shoulders. As I walk this path, there are even times when I wish I could rid myself of this heavy commitment. The only reason I have been able to make it this far is because I was deeply moved by Omori Roshi. When I said to him, "My goal in life is to become like you," he instantly replied, "You must surpass a person like me."

There is a saying in Buddhism, "The *Dharma* becomes alive and priceless only through the lives of people who practice it." The 1,700 *koan* and the 5,040 *sutra* are dead words until they are embodied in the life of an enlightened person. The story of Omori Roshi's life, which comprises the first part of the book, illustrates how an ordinary human being, not so different from each of us, became the greatest Japanese Zen master of modern time through arduous training. As much as

possible, I have used Omori Roshi's own words to tell his story. His text is indented while my comments appear in a regular format.

The second part of the book, *The Three Ways*, presents the three traditions Omori Roshi trained in. "Way" is a translation of the Japanese *Do* which in turn is a translation of the Chinese *Tao*. A distinctive achievement of Japanese culture was to transform fighting skills such as swordsmanship, fine arts such as calligraphy, and even routine activities such as serving tea into formal disciplines which ultimately lead to the realization of *Tao*. By integrating the Ways of martial arts, Zen, and calligraphy, Omori Roshi developed a unique method of training which has the vitality of the martial arts, the spiritual depth of Zen, and the refinement of the fine arts.

Chapter Four, *Zen and Budo* (Martial Way), is an edited version of the more formal translation by Tanouye Tenshin, Archbishop of Daihonzan Chozen-ji. In this essay Omori Roshi reconciles the seeming contradiction between the martial ways as a method of killing people and Zen as a means of removing delusions and becoming enlightened.

Chapter Five (Practical Zen) and Chapter Six (*Teisho: The World of the Absolute Present*) present Omori Roshi's insights into both the practice and metaphysics of Zen. Practical Zen provides solutions to problems encountered in Zen training. These solutions are based on Omori Roshi's own training and his translation of Buddhist philosophy into practical application. The World of the Absolute Present contains excerpts from Omori Roshi's *teisho* on Sanboin (The Three Truths of the *Dharma*). These excerpts are metaphysical and develop the concept that all Buddhist theory emerges and returns to one principle: *Nirvana* is the point at which time and space intersect. To clearly understand the "I" which exists at this intersection has been the ultimate goal of Zen training since ancient times. When this

understanding penetrates one's entire being, it is called *Nirvana* and Freedom. When this "totally free person" acts, Zen art is expressed.

Chapter Seven presents Zen art through Omori Roshi's calligraphy. From the Zen viewpoint, the mere movement of an arm or leg of the "totally free person" is Zen art. Omori Roshi's calligraphy is simply another, perhaps more traditional, window into the art of a Zen master. In any art whether it be a martial art like swordsmanship or a fine art like calligraphy, creativity only emerges from the mastery of technique, but in Zen art creativity must be grounded in the realization of the True Self.

In creative activity, an artist who has mastered technique uses space, time, and energy in a manner which is beyond conscious contrivance. Within his artistic medium he freely expresses his intuitions and insight. For the Zen master, because his creativity is grounded in the realization of the True Self, life itself is the medium of his art. Everything he does, from routine activities to moral decisions, shines with a wondrous quality. Omori Roshi's life was devoted first to the realization of the True Self and then to its expression and endless refinement in swordsmanship, calligraphy, scholarship, politics, and religion. His life is worthy to be considered a masterpiece of Zen art.

PART I

The Life of Omori Sogen

CHAPTER 1

Shugyo

Shugyo: the deepest level of training in the Way.

1904–1934

Childhood

Omori Sogen was born Omori Arinobu in Yamanashi prefecture on March 10, 1904, in a family which descended from the *samurai* class. He received the name Sogen when he became a priest in 1942. He was the fourth child in a family of five children. As a child Omori Roshi was small and quiet until he discovered his strength in the fifth grade. He writes this of his childhood.

When I was little, I did well in school and was on the quiet side, but in about the fifth grade, I did *Sumo* (Japanese wrestling) with the strongest boy at school. I threw him to the ground with no difficulty. From that time, I developed great confidence in my physical strength and became more and more unruly. In the end, I was taking it upon myself to fight on my older brother's behalf. No matter how strong an opponent appeared, I didn't want to lose.¹

One day when I went home crying, my father scolded me severely, "Don't you ever come home crying after a fight! Go and hit your opponent with this!" and handed me a *bokuto* (wooden sword). I did what he said and went home.

He then yelled at me, "You idiot! How could you hit your own brother!" It seems that my older brother had gone home crying before I got home and told my father that I had hit him with the sword.

My father had given me the *bokuto* and told me to hit my opponent, but when I did so, my father reproached me sternly. I thought that was ridiculous.²

Omori Roshi was told by his mother that he was "too theoretical," so when he was 14 or 15 this theoretical youth began to practice *Kendo* simply to become stronger. At that time he lived in Tokyo and went to Kinjo Intermediate School. His first teacher was Imoto Saburo Yoshiaki of the Hokushin Itto Style. Several years later, Imoto Sensei died, and

Omori Roshi diligently commuted to the Yushinkan of Nakayama Hakudo.

At the age of 19, Omori Roshi became seriously ill. He recalls this below:

I caught a cold suddenly in January and had a high fever. I was unconscious for most of February and March. I didn't know who I was. At the beginning of March, all of a sudden, I regained consciousness and realized that I was lying on a *futon* (Japanese mattress) on the floor. I had become skin and bones. Then, for the first time since my illness, I ate rice gruel. March 10 was my birthday, so I tried to stand. I did so with great difficulty by holding on to a pillar. My mother said happily, "You stood, didn't you? You stood, didn't you?"

From that time, however, my mother lay sick next to me. Early one morning, she vomited blood and died. When we called the doctor, he said that she had been ill with ulcers before and that her ruptured stomach caused her to vomit blood and die. But the neighborhood women came and told me this, "Ever since you became ill during the coldest part of winter, your mother went to the well every morning without fail and threw cold well water on herself saying, 'Please exchange my life for my child's.' Because you recovered, your mother's life was taken away and she died."

Maybe it was just something said by ignorant women, but I firmly believe what they told me. They were telling the truth. Why did I believe their story? Because, from that time on, I forgot what my mother looked like. Now or even right after her death, though I look at my mother's picture, I can't think that she is my mother. I wonder who this person is. I don't remember my mother's face at all. Because the life that I am now living is my mother's, I cannot look at her as a son would look at his mother. My mother is here; she has become me; I have come to believe this. Because my life is my mother's life, I must take care of it, value my life, and live for as long as I can. I must carry on the life of my mother who died so quickly and so young.³

Maeno Sensei and Oda Sensei

Though he had the misfortune to lose his mother, Omori Roshi felt very fortunate because he was able to find excellent teachers. Around the time of his mother's death, he met Maeno Jisui (1870–1940), his first teacher in Zen.

I met Maeno Sensei during the spring of my nineteenth year. I was a student at Nihon University and also worked part-time. During winter vacation, I sorted New Year's cards at the post office. Once when I had to stay overnight there, I was bored and found the magazine, "Zen and Taoism," published by Maeno Sensei. Because a part of me had been interested in Zen since childhood, I went to see Maeno Sensei right away. He headed an association called Taigendo Shoja. For three years, rain or shine, I went there every night. This was the place where I received my first instruction in the Way.

Maeno Sensei was born in Tosa (in Shikoku). When he was fourteen, he was troubled and frustrated because he couldn't understand "*Chigyō Go Itsu*" ("What you know and what you do are the same," or "the unity of knowing and doing"). Someone told him to see a Zen priest so he went to see Shiragi Jitsuzen Zenji. Jitsuzen Zenji belonged to the Suio Line (following the *dharma* lineage of Hakuin).

While Maeno Sensei was studying at Waseda Law School, now Waseda University, he met Nakahara Toju (Nantenbo). When Nantenbo wanted to give him *inka shomei* ("mind-stamp," certifying his enlightenment), he refused, saying that he didn't need such a thing and that he would receive it directly from Shakyamuni Buddha. Maeno Sensei graduated from Waseda and became a forest ranger because he said that it was more advantageous to train by himself in the mountains. Eventually he became the student of Miyachi Izuo of the Department of the

Imperial Household. He studied Japanese classical literature and *Taoism*. Maeno Sensei was also an expert in the martial arts. He learned swordsmanship from Kurachi Budayu and became a master of the Mugai Style of *Iaido* (the art of drawing and cutting with the sword). He was also an authority on the Takenouchi Style of *Jujitsu*. Besides speaking on Zen, he lectured on Japanese literature, *Shinto* law, and *Taoist* writings. I also heard some of his lectures on Lao Tze.

Maeno Sensei could drink *sake* in quantity. After *sanzen* (private interview with Zen master), Sensei would go into the kitchen and have his evening drink. After I had been going to Taigendo Shoja for a while, he called from the kitchen, "Is that you Omori? Come in for awhile." He said, "Have a drink," and offered me a *sake* cup. I was nineteen, but since I had never drunk, I drank it down in a gulp.

"You can really drink. Have another cup," he said. Again I gulped it down.

"You like *sake*. Have another." So saying, he made me drink. In the end, he taught me how to drink before he taught me *zazen*.

At these "drinking *zazen* sessions," he told me about many things: the "old days," the period of his training and Zen writings, and the literature about hermits. I will never know how much I learned from these sessions because of the wide scope of topics. Maeno Sensei was a very profound man with substantial ability. He said, "I could easily get three or four doctorates if I wanted to." This was no empty boast. Everyone agreed that it was true. This teacher's influence broadened my horizon tremendously.

When we travelled to Korea together, he was reading Marx's *Das Kapital*. Another time, he was reading the *Bible*. Therefore, I, too, read many of Marx's books including *Das Kapital*. Also I read the whole *Bible*, both the old and the new testaments; this taught me a great deal.⁴