

*Michael Wenger*

Sekito Kisen (Ch. Shitou Xiqian, 700–790), author of the *Sandokai*, was born in Guangdong Province in southern China in the beginning of the eighth century. This was a formative era in which Zen was growing in popularity and was first articulated as a unique school and lineage. Questions about the nature and origins of Zen and the earliest surviving accounts of the First Chinese Zen Ancestor, Bodhidharma (c. 470–543), date from this time.

It was also during this period that Zen became known for its emphasis on the direct experience of reality and the practice of seated meditation. But sectarian disputes arose between the Northern school of Zen, which taught a doctrine of gradual, step-ladder practice, and the Southern school, which taught that attaining enlightenment is sudden and immediate. Debates flourished over which lineage was superior. From today's perspective, the differences between the two schools seem exaggerated, as both schools emphasized sudden attainment as well as constant cultivation, primarily through

seated meditation. Indeed, the Northern school originally was very popular and influential, but after several generations its influence and identity as a separate school faded.

Not much is known about Sekito's life. The first recorded event is an encounter, at the age of twelve, with the Sixth Ancestor, Daikan Eno (Ch. Dajian Huineng, 638–713). When the precocious youth approached Eno, the master jokingly said, "If you become my disciple you'll start to look [ugly] like me." Sekito smiled and said, "Fine." Two years later he was one of the disciples present at Eno's deathbed.

Sekito seems to have practiced basically alone for the next fifteen years, after which he settled down to study with one of Eno's main disciples, Seigen Gyoshi (Ch. Qingyuan Xingsi, 660–740). After their first dialogue, Seigen said of his new disciple: "I have many horned animals in my assembly. One unicorn is all I need."

In 742, Sekito built a hut on a large stone ledge on Mount Heng in what is now Hunan Province. His name Sekito, "stone head," derives from his sitting zazen on this stone ledge. Eihei Dogen, who brought Soto Zen to Japan five centuries later, wrote the following about Sekito:

Great Master Shitou [Sekito] did zazen on a large rock where he had a thatched hut. He sat continuously without sleeping day or night. Although he did not ignore work, he did not fail to do zazen throughout the day. Nowadays the descendants of his teacher Qingyuan [Seigen] are spread throughout China, benefiting humans and devas. This is all due to the solid continuous practice and the great determination of Shitou [Sekito].

Several exchanges between Sekito and students have been preserved. In one such encounter, Sekito's disciple Tenno Dogo (Ch. Tianhuang Daowu, 748–827) asked his teacher who was the rightful heir of the Sixth Ancestor.

“Who obtained the essential teaching of the Sixth Ancestor?”

Sekito replied: “He who understands buddha dharma obtained it.”

“Did you obtain it?” Dogo asked.

“I don't understand buddha dharma,” Sekito replied.

On another occasion a monk asked Sekito: “How does one get emancipation?”

Sekito: “Who has put you in bondage?”

Monk: “What is the Pure Land?”

Sekito: “Who has defiled you?”

Monk: “What is nirvana?”

Sekito: “Who has placed you in birth-and-death?”



It was said that a monk remained ignorant unless he visited both South of the Lake with Master Sekito and West of the River with Master Baso (Ch. Mazu, 709–788). The five schools of Zen developed from these two great teachers who, during their time, truly embodied the way of Zen. While there is no record of them having met in person, each sent his students to study with the other.

Here is an example of the way they interacted with Yakusan Igen (Ch. Yaoshan Weiyan, 745–828), who later became one of Sekito's successors. Yakusan visited Sekito and asked

him: “I understand the scriptural teachings of Buddhism, but I hear that in the south they [Zen practitioners] directly point to the human mind. They see their natures and become buddhas. This is still not clear to me. I humbly ask you to explain it.”

Sekito said: “This way won’t do and not this way won’t do, and both this way and not this way won’t do. How about you?”

Yakusan was dumbfounded.

Sekito said: “You should go see Baso.”

So Yakusan paid his respects to Baso and asked the same question.

Baso said: “Sometimes I make ‘him’ raise his eyebrows and blink, sometimes I do not make ‘him’ raise his eyebrows and blink. Sometimes raising the eyebrows and blinking is all right, sometimes raising the eyebrows and blinking is not all right. How about you?”

Hearing these words, Yakusan was greatly awakened, and he bowed.

Baso asked: “What truth have you seen that makes you bow?”

Yakusan replied: “When I was with Sekito, it was like a mosquito climbing on an iron ox.”

Baso said: “Since you have realized the truth, you must guard it well. But still, your master is Sekito.”

Another exchange between Sekito and Yakusan demonstrates a true meeting of teacher and student. One day, seeing Yakusan sitting zazen, Sekito asked him: “What are you doing here?”

Yakusan answered: "I'm not doing anything at all."

Sekito said: "In that case, you are sitting idly."

Yakusan replied: "If I were sitting idly, then I would be doing something."

Sekito asked: "You say you are not doing anything. What is this 'not doing'?"

Yakusan replied: "Not even the ten thousand sages know."



The *Sandokai* (Ch. *Cantongqi*) addresses the division between the Northern and Southern schools as well as other dichotomies such as one and many, light and dark, sameness and difference. (In today's scientific climate, Sekito might well have written of wave and particle.) Made up of twenty-two couplets (forty-four lines), the poem often follows a pattern of distinguishing first discontinuity, then continuity, and finally complementarity.

An earlier Daoist text on the *Yijing* bore the title *Sandokai*, and Sekito's poem alludes to Daoist themes of nature and change. It also shows the influence of Kegon philosophy (the Huayen or Flower Garland school of Buddhism), which teaches the equality of all things and the dependence of all things on one another.

The importance of the *Sandokai* to the Soto Zen lineage is clearly of the first order. The poem is chanted every day in Soto Zen temples throughout the world, and almost always when a memorial service is held for the founder of a temple.

Three generations after Sekito, Tozan Ryokai (Ch. Dongshan Liangjie, 807–869) wrote the *Hokyo Zammai* (Ch. *Baojing Sanmei*), which developed ideas from the *Sandokai*. The teaching of the five ranks also grew out of the *Sandokai*.

I conclude with the last couplet of the *Sandokai*, the sentiments of which are often written on the *han*, the wooden board struck to announce meditation in Zen temples and monasteries: “I respectfully urge you who study the mystery, do not pass your days and nights in vain.”