

## Maitre Wanshi Shôgaku

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Following Master Keizan's *Zazen Yojinki*, "*Recommendations for the Practice of Zazen*", I would like to follow up his teaching with another text with a similar title: "*Advice for the Practice of Zen*" by Master Wanshi Shôgaku<sup>1</sup>.

Wanshi Shôgaku, a Chinese master (1091-1157), influenced Master Dogen as much as Master Keizan. He is one of the most famous Zen masters of the Song period and was the disciple of Tanka Shijun, also a Patriarch in our lineage.

We owe to Master Wanshi the sublime poem of the *Mokushoka*, "*The Song of Silent Illumination*", which every practitioner must absorb. This title refers to the Zen of silent illumination, *Mokushô Zen*, the expression by which Master Wanshi designates his own practice, thus differentiating himself from the method of contemplation of words (Kanna-zen), which is to say the method of the *koans* of the Rinzai school, which he does not, however, reject.

It was his full realisation that pushed Master Wanshi to reform the Chinese Caodong School (Sôtô in Japanese), a Zen school whose origins can be traced back to Tôzan Ryôkai (807-869), the Patriarch of our lineage who was the first to make a distinction between silent practice, zazen, and the *koan* method of Lin-Tsi [Lin Chi] (Master Rinzai, died in 866).

Wanshi was ordained as a novice at the age of eleven, very young, as was Master Dogen 50 years later. At the age of 38, he took over the direction of the Tiantong monastery in Ming [present day Zhejiang] province and remained there until his death. Under his leadership, this ancient temple found new splendour and soon attracted hundreds of monks. He left the mountain for only a few weeks in the autumn of 1157 to thank the temple's donors before returning to die, having entrusted the temple to Dahui Zongao (Jap. Daie Sôkô, 1089-1163).

Wanshi left an important collection of teachings, sermons and poetry known as the *Recorded Sayings of Wanshi*. He is particularly influenced by the doctrine of the Five Ranks, which describes the inner journey to the perfect understanding of the unity of the absolute and the relative.

One of the main texts attributed to him is the *Shôyôroku*, the *Book of Equanimity*, which collects a set of *kôans* with which he himself taught his disciples, proof that he was not locked into his own Zen.

Master Wanshi's "*Advice for Practice*" number fifty-five. They are paragraphs of 15 to 20 lines and each one has a title which, in itself, constitutes an element of reflection for each one of us. The first one we will study together is called "*The Bright and Limitless Field*". It would be possible to devote several weeks to commenting on it, because what it evokes is crucial for our practice. It is about absolute emptiness, the transparent source, non-thinking, everything that helps us to stay on the Way.

While waiting to share it with you, here is the first sentence of the *Mokushôka*, which you have probably already heard from me:

*"When, in silence, words are forgotten, in clarity  
It appears before you.*

*"When you realise It, time has no limit and this is  
the moment when your very heart comes to  
life."*

In the silence of zazen, before words come to you, your very heart comes to life. It is nothing more than your child's heart, which no longer knows anything at all about distinctions. You gaze at the world which is appearing-disappearing. There is no longer beautiful and ugly, nor rich and poor. There is simply *that which is alive* gazing at itself, in the midst of whatever comes and goes.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps better known in the UK as Hongzhi Zhengjue