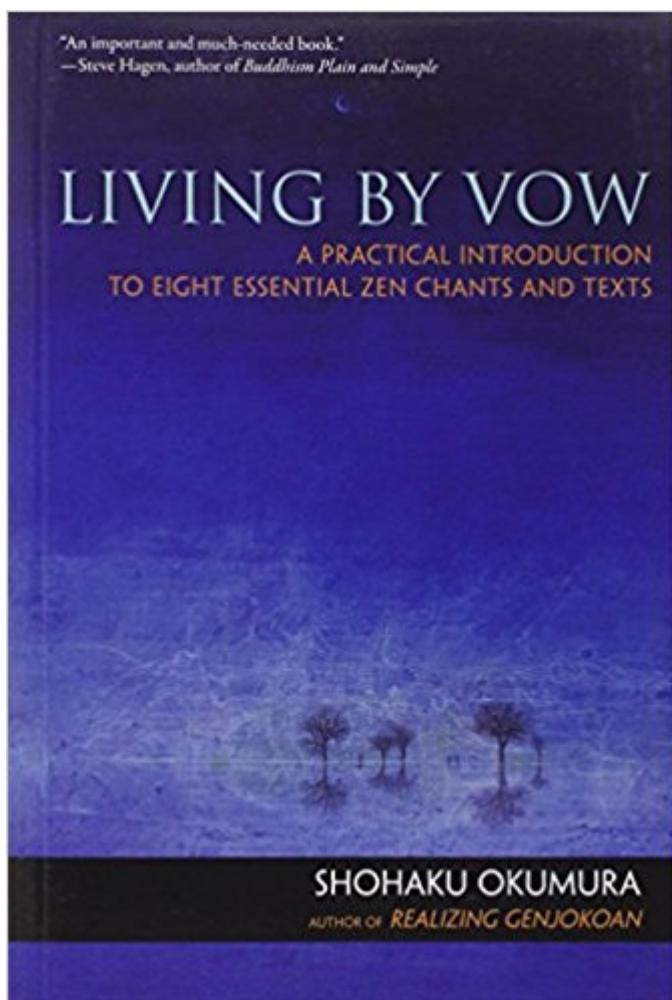


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# Living By Vow: A Practical Introduction To Eight Essential Zen Chants And Texts



## Synopsis

This immensely useful book explores Zen's rich tradition of chanted liturgy and the powerful ways that such chants support meditation, expressing and helping us truly uphold our heartfelt vows to live a life of freedom and compassion. Exploring eight of Zen's most essential and universal liturgical texts, *Living by Vow* is a handbook to walking the Zen path, and Shohaku Okumura guides us like an old friend, speaking clearly and directly of the personal meaning and implications of these chants, generously using his experiences to illustrate their practical significance. A scholar of Buddhist literature, he masterfully uncovers the subtle, intricate web of culture and history that permeate these great texts. Esoteric or challenging terms take on vivid, personal meaning, and old familiar phrases gain new poetic resonance.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Okumura offers his own perspective on different interpretations of these texts, giving detailed analysis of key Japanese words in order to illuminate unseen meanings. In doing so, he shares his personal experiences of these practices, lifting these texts out of their familiar ceremonial settings and bringing them into conversation with the Zen practitioner. The book goes beyond an explication of specific chants and rituals to reveal that the unifying practice of Zen is living by the bodhisattva's vow." (Buddhadharma)"Living by Vow is a unique and wonderful combination of skillful, fresh translations and Dharma discourses by a Zen priest who is a scholar, a long-term practitioner, and a Zen master. Shohaku Okumura reveals his own life vow as he helps us dive deeply into the many

chants that are recited daily in Buddhist temples around the world, rendering them accessible and beautifully relevant to our lives. This is a book to read and re-read, to consult and cite." (Jan Chozen Bays, author of *How to Train a Wild Elephant: And Other Adventures in Mindfulness*) "Living By Vow unpacks much of the Zen liturgy with striking clarity, depth, and detail. Shohaku's writing manifests the deep, settled mind of the Soto school. A refreshing read! This is an essential resource for students and teachers alike." (Dosho Port, author of *Keep Me in Your Heart a While*) "An important and much-needed book. Shohaku Okumura's elucidations of these fundamental teachings--so familiar to many, yet so often poorly understood--make plain how profound they truly are." (Steve Hagen, author of *Buddhism Plain and Simple*) "In this lovely and informative book, Shohaku Okumura illuminates the meaning of the texts we chant in so many Zen practice centers. The combination of his abundance of knowledge and his personal openness allow these ancient words to come alive. I am grateful for Okumura Roshi's gift of scholarship and heart, and look forward to enjoying his wise companionship in my own chanting practice." (Melissa Myozen Blacker, coeditor of *The Book of Mu*) "Drawing on teachings from a variety of Zen teachers as well as his wide knowledge of the Buddhist canon, Shohaku Okumura offers us new ways to approach these sometimes too familiar passages. His writing is always infused by his great love of practice and his love for the living practice of Zen." (David Rynick, author of *This Truth Never Fails: A Zen Memoir in Four Seasons*) "A great book. Steeped in the best of the Japanese Soto Zen tradition, Shohaku Okumura has lived and taught in America for decades. This experience--honed by the sincerity of Shohaku's character, scholarship, and commitment--results in a rare text that fully integrates the richness of Dogen's culturally profound Buddhism with the needs of the contemporary student. Shohaku's discussion of Soto Zen's key liturgical texts will be required reading for all students of that tradition--and will be of great benefit to anyone who wants to appreciate the nature and scope of religious life. I am inspired and delighted by this book and will be using it for a long time to come." (Zoketsu Norman Fischer, author of *Training in Compassion: Zen Teachings on the Practice of Lojong*) "This book features detailed commentary on a series of fundamental texts including historical, philosophical, and practice perspectives, and will be very useful to all beginning Zen students, and also illuminating for many long-time practitioners." (Taigen Dan Leighton, author of *Zen Questions: Zazen, Dogen, and the Spirit of Creative Inquiry*)

Shohaku Okumura is a Soto Zen priest and Dharma successor of Kosho Uchiyama Roshi. He is a graduate of Komazawa University and has practiced in Japan at Antaiji, Zuioji, and the Kyoto Soto Zen Center, and in Massachusetts at the Pioneer Valley Zendo. He is the former director of the Soto

Zen Buddhism International Center in San Francisco. His previously published books of translation include *Shobogenzo Zuimonki*, *Dogen Zen*, *Zen Teachings of Homeless Kodo*, and *Opening the Hand of Thought*. Okumura is also editor of *Dogen Zen and Its Relevance for Our Time* and *SotoZen*. He is the founding teacher of the Sanshin Zen Community, based in Bloomington, Indiana, where he lives with his family.

For years I have recited the various verses we recite before or after meditation and other events without really understanding why or what we were really talking about. This book is a classical explication de texte of these ancient verses squarely anchored in the context of the great Japanese philosopher monk of ancient Japan, Dogen Zenji, founder of the principal Soto school of Zen, which was transmitted to the West by Shunryu Suzuki in San Francisco, and Taisan Maezumi in Los Angeles. I am only half way through it and all the things I thought before have already been completely undone. I have listened to many mystifying Dharma talks from Western masters and Tibetan lamas, and I have laboriously read all 4 volumes of Gudo Nishima's edition of Dogen's *Shobogenzo*, with all the erudite academic annotations, but this simple volume, *Living by Vow*, in plain language from the inside perspective of a Japanese Zen monk who grew up in this tradition in his native Japan, and whose translations of the daily Zen liturgy into modern English are so eloquent, has taken me to a new level of appreciation and understanding, or not understanding and being free with that. For anyone seeking a way through the mystifying permutations of Zen franchises proliferating our world of spiritual consumerism, this is a capital book!

This is a fantastic book. I bought it as a "quick read" while I was waiting for some hard-copy books to ship, thinking that I could blow through it in a couple of days. Far from it! This book requires a depth of attention and one willingly gives it thanks to the easy and charming writing style. It is, as it says on the tin, about the chants and vows we go through as part of our practice, but goes to the heart of them, giving them a deeper meaning and usually line-by-line analyzes them. This is a book that will be read MANY times and is heavily highlighted and bookmarked. I've recommended it to my teacher and new practitioners alike. It would be excellent for a book group or a study group. This book will enrich your practice and your understanding of why we say what we say. I find it an essential edition to my books on Zen Buddhism, and I have very few that I consider worth that place.

*Living by Vow*, by Shohaku Okumura: Okumura Roshi comments and explicates a number of

commonly used Zen chants, including the Chinese and Japanese meanings of some of the words. For those who chant these on a regular basis, it's a great help to have their deeper meanings as they apply to one's life.

It seems that I have been waiting for this book for a very long time. The essence of the book is to guide and explain in the most straight forward way that I have ever read on Zen practice. Not one of the chapters explains more than an everyday "ordinariness" in Zen but the explanation brings the reader into a world of deep and, on occasions for me, profound understanding of what this practically means in a Zen way. This book will require more than one reading; not because it is difficult to read (on the contrary, it is very easy to read) but because of the important insights that it contains into the human condition and how Zen practice may assist us to find a better way of living. I owe Shohaku Okamura a debt of gratitude for this important work, thank you.

While this book is written specifically for practitioners of Soto Zen Buddhism, I would recommend it to any serious Buddhist practitioner or anyone simply interested in truly understanding Buddhism (the Dharma). The insights that Shokaku Okumura presents here are clear, deep and relevant to everyone's life. He has given me much greater insight into the important Buddhist teachings on vow, emptiness, The Four Noble Truths, The Three Jewels (refuges), and continuous practice. You owe it to yourself to read this outstanding book, and then practice with its teachings each and every day for the rest of your life.

Plainspoken and clear, Okumura sensei's commentaries and analysis are grounded in decades of practice and study.

Terrific lucid author. Explains subtle ideas concretely with a deep understanding born out of his life of Zen and his excellent understanding of how to bridge American and Japanese cultures.

This is a great subsequent read to "Realizing Genjo-ko-an: The Key to Do-gen's Sho-bo-zen-bo-genzo-kyo" (his most famous written text), which is written by Shohaku Okumura (a Bodhisattva like Do-gen) and a deshi or disciple of his Sensei (teacher) Kodo Sawaki Roshi and also, Kodo Uchiyama Roshi, whom they both followed. I suggest reading the following in this order: "Realizing Genjo-ko-an: The Key to Do-gen's

ShoÅfÅ'Å â boÅfÅ'Å â genzoÅfÅ'Å â , then "DoÅfÅ'Å â gen's GenjoÅfÅ'Å â koÅfÅ'Å â an with Three Commentaries," followed by this text or "Living by Vow: A Practical Introduction to Eight Essential Zen Chants and Texts." Namaste!

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