

# Kokyo Instructions

Kokyo may be considered the most advanced Doan Ryo position in that it is the Kokyo that both sustains the continuous sound of service and is the leader of the chanting pitch, pace, flow and energy. Usually one is Kokyo only after having had significant experience in all the other Doan Ryo positions.

## Basic points:

### I. Exercises before being Kokyo:

- a. Pay attention to your breath as often as possible.
- b. Breathe from your hara. Try this exercise: exhale from your hara fully, and at the end of the exhale push *even more* breath out two more times without breathing in. Then simply relax to allow the air to rush back in. Pay attention to the feeling of your breath entering and exiting your body. Do this three times in a row whenever you think of it.
- c. Practice “o” “a”, and “e” sounds. See how long you can sustain them. Pay attention to your body, and feel your jaw, mouth, throat, and abdomen open and relax as you are sounding. Experiment with resonance by playing with the location of the sound in your body.
- d. Try chanting the Enmei Juku Kannon Gyo without stopping for a breath. See how far you get. When you run out of breath, simply let go to allow the air to come back in and resume chanting.
- e. Practice with pitch. Find the pitch you are looking for in your body and become familiar with the feeling of it.

### II. Being Kokyo:

1. Be in gassho every time you announce a chant or give a dedication; at the beginning until the doshi bows and you bow with the doshi, and at the end of each chant at the first of the two small bells when the doshi puts their hands in gassho, and during all times the assembly is in gassho.
2. Move as one with the Doshi:
  - a. Keep the Doshi in your peripheral vision.
  - b. When going into gassho or bowing, time your movements exactly in time with the Doshi, not moving faster or slower than them.
  - c. In picking up or putting down the chantbook and/or chantbook stand, keep your movements in alignment with the Doshi. Turn towards the book on your left exactly in time with the Doshi passing you on their way up to the altar. As they bow at the altar you should be going down on one knee to pick up the book (for evening service – on one knee) or the book and stand (morning service). Turn back to your usual position at your own pace- timing this with the Doshi is awkward.
3. Continuous Sound
  - a. One of the Kokyo’s most important tasks as the leader of the assembly is to maintain continuous sound during the transitions between making the announcement and chanting, chanting and reciting the eko, or ending one chant and announcing the following one. Remember that the Kokyo is holding the energy and space for the entire assembly and should not lose steam just when everyone else is starting out.
  - b. Have enough breath such that you can make the announcement and start in on the chanting for at least the first few words of the chant, until the assembly is fully engaged in the chant. Then drop out to allow your breath to come back in. For chants accompanied by the mokugyo, keep an eye on the Tenken so you know when they sound their first “bop” of the mokugyo. Start the chant on that “bop.”

- c. Drop out of chanting a few words before the end of the chant to take a deep breath, then rejoin the chant for the last few words. Extend the last syllable *without* dropping in pitch (the assembly will drop in pitch as they trail off on that last syllable) and go into the eko strongly.
4. Pronunciation and enunciation:
    - a. Know how to pronounce the Japanese words *before* you are kokyo. If you have any doubt, ask the Ino beforehand. This includes having an understanding of how to read the diacritical marks.
    - b. Keep your voice strong and steady, with *as little variation in pitch as possible, except for the shomyo*. Do your best to try not to channel Bob Dylan when you are Kokyo. Pay particular attention to certain hotspot words like: “May,” “Our” and “Great.”
    - c. Pay attention to the pace of words, not collapsing some words or syllables of words and overextending others. Your voice and the pace should remain even and steady.
    - d. Pay attention to vowels, especially the vowel “o.” Examples: “Ancestor” vs “ancester” and “wisdom” vs. “wisdum.” It is important to be aware of the shape of your mouth and keep it unclenched and fully engaged. Of course you do not want to over enunciate. Be subtle: do not stand out as an over-ennunciator.
  5. Start and end strong and unwavering in the announcements and dedications:
    - a. Your first word should fill the room with sound without overpowering the assembly’s ears. Go for resonance over volume. Keep it steady (no Bob Dylan).
    - b. The last word/syllable of each line should be extended and the volume rises ever-so-slightly towards the end. It should not be noticeable to the assembly, but should provide subtle energy to the assembly.
  6. The Eko: The guttural stop
    - a. When the pitch rises during the eko each line should end strongly, without trailing off. The guttural stop is when the last syllable is strong up to the end, with a “cutting off” at the very end. What you want to avoid in doing the guttural stop is sounding as if you are being choked. Your pitch should not rise up in a squeaking sound. The guttural stop can be difficult for first time Kokyos and is a technique in the advanced Kokyo’s repertoire. Practice before attempting it and only employ it if it can be done so naturally.
    - b. The guttural stop is appropriate for the ends of some lines and not others. Check with the Ino about these variations.
    - c. As with everything else, do not force it. It should be slightly subtle and should not raise eyebrows in the room. As such, it is best to do *only* when you are completely relaxed with it.
  7. The Shomyo: pace, pitch and warble
    - a. The Shomyo is the variation of pitch on the last syllable at the end of the announcement or eko.
    - b. The pace of the shomyo sets the pace of the instruments and chanting.  
Ex: “En Mei Juku Kannon Gyo ~ ~ o ~ o ~ ~” <Bong!> <Thump!> “Kan ze on...”
    - c. There are three parts to the shomyo: first, middle, and last.
    - d. The first part is just the extension of the syllable. It can be fairly long in comparison to the middle part and sounds nice if you can add a slight warble to it. This warble is similar to the guttural stop in that you may be using the same musculature. Another way to do the warble is to allow a slight amount of vibrato to your voice.
    - e. The middle part is the dip down. Ideally you can drop the pitch down a fifth. The third is also acceptable. You do not want to extend this part for very long at all. It is best to simply drop down for a brief moment and then come back up for the last part of the shomyo. If this part is extended as long as the first and last, you end up sounding like a foghorn, which is not so nice.

- f. The last part is the longest and should not trail off in volume but should rather increase just slightly in order to pull the assembly in to the chant or “All Buddhas.” Remember that you need to have enough breath to carry into the chanting with the assembly.
- 8. Working as a team:  
Remember that the Kokyo is only one of the major components of the service. Be attentive to the Doan and Tenken along with the Doshi. Harmonize with each other and do not try to control the service with your pace or volume. It is especially important to completely be supportive of the Tenken in their mokugyo playing. It is very easy for a headstrong Kokyo to sabotage the mokugyo playing. Chant with your ears and support the pace set by the mokugyo. Be steady.
- 9. Chant with energy:  
It is important that the Kokyo leads and sustains the energy of the assembly. A sleepy or apathetic-sounding Kokyo can drain any energy the sangha has in their chanting. Energy does not mean volume. Know the difference. Be conscious of the meaning of the words you are chanting in the dedications. Chant the dedications like you mean it, as if the entire sangha is relying on you to transfer all merit and save all beings. Be completely responsible.
- 10. You are not the star of the service. Service is not a show or a performance, and it is not about you. Completely understanding this is essential to the final point of these instructions...
- 11. Relax. Relax your breathing, your abdomen, your throat, your mouth, your jaw, the space between your eyebrows, and your mind. Allow fast-beating heart to be just fast-beating heart. Allow sweaty palms to be just sweaty palms. Being in accord with your breath and to the entire assembly.

[Compiled and written at Tassajara Summer 2009 by Tanto Kokyo Henkel & Ino Mako Voelkel]