

Eihei Dogen's letter. from 1235, hoping to raise money for a training centre in Japan.

From the San Francisco Zen Center, a translation of an appeal sent to Buddhist monks throughout Japan in 1235 by Eihei Dogen, monk of the Kannondori Monastery. (The letter submitted by San Francisco Bay Area fundraising consultant Lisa Hoffman and was translated by Michael Wenger and Kazuaki Tanaka.) The letter begins:

We respectfully make this announcement to all buddhas in the ten directions, sages and monks in the heavenly and human worlds, the eight types of beings in the dragon realm, generous men and women. We wish to construct a training hall with small donations from people's pure heart.

Now, how's that for targeting the audience? "Eight types of beings in the dragon realm" as well as "generous men and women?"

The letter continues after two paragraphs of references to Buddhist duty:

For some years ever since I returned to Japan from China, I have vowed to establish a monastery. But there has not been a place suitable to support monks' formal practice using bowls and robes. Now we have acquired an excellent place . . . Although it is still covered with weeds and not yet functioning, we plan to build a training monastery there . . .

We urgently need a Monks' Hall right now. We plan to build one seven ken square [70-foot-square], with no interior walls. We will set up long platforms to reside on, where we will practice day and night without fail...

It's difficult to find a better example in contemporary fundraising letters of a specific justification for the need for money. And did you notice the urgent note in the copy?

The letter continues by noting the great impact the new monastery can have on the practice of Buddhism and how it represents the latest expression of a centuries-old tradition, then offers this note about donor recognition:

We will acknowledge gifts by installing the donors' names in the center of the sacred image. The myriad syllables of the seed wisdom will honor the donors and everyone.

The monk's letter closes on a lyrical note, waxing poetic about the celestial scope of the project:

Those who attain the way in this hall will be guiding masters of the assembly. Truly they will be knowledgeable and reach not only the human realm but transform beings in the heavenly realm and in the dragons' palace. Those in the realms of magic and darkness will also listen. Thus this dharma wheel transmitted from Shyakyamuni Buddha can reach everywhere.

Who could possibly resist such a compelling appeal?