

Austin Zen Center - Inconceivable Joy Temple
Soku & Server Instructions for Zendo Meals



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Preparation

Gather the basic items at least the day before the retreat starts. Most supplies are stored in the soku containers above kitchen cupboards. The Ino can help.

Getting Started before mealtime at retreat

- Server napkins (1/server).
- 2 Kentan towels (for spills, etc.)
- Abbreviated soku instructions
- Abbreviated head server instructions
- Clappers (kaishaku) – check that they are on the foyer table just outside the zendo
- Teapots (usually 2-4) with paper napkins folded for serving – they are stored above the dining room cabinet. Fill with one half inch of cold water and place on the counter ready for the addition of hot water.
- Buckets (usually 2-4, the same number as tea pots)
- Hot pads for the pots
- Serving utensils: check on the food to be served and the number of pots for each bowl, then and select the appropriate utensils. Put them on a tray, cover with a clean cloth, and leave them on the dining room table.
 1. Use **metal ladles** for cereals, soups and juices, and **plastic ladles** for yogurt. Do not use pitchers in the zendo to serve any liquids.
 2. Wooden paddles should be used in addition to other utensils for first pot grains, like rice, cereal or most medicine bowl dishes.
 3. Use large metal server spoons for rice, couscous, and quinoa.
 4. Use medium flat spoons for nuts, eggs and most tofu dishes.
 5. Tongs should be used for salads and muffins or cornbread (if served)

Gomashio

- The gomashio is stored in the freezer.
- To determine the number of gomashio bowls needed, divide the number of people in the zendo by 2 and then add another few bowls to be on the safe side. For example, in a sesshin that has 20 people in zendo for the meal, you would probably set up around 12 gomashio bowls divided among the trays.
- Prepare 2-4 wooden trays with all the gomasio-filled tea-cups on the trays.
- Fill dishes with gomashio, put tiny spoons on the trays, *but not in the bowls yet*, cover with clean towels until it's time to serve.

Before the Meal

- Bring TV-trays from library closet to the foyer for those in chairs.
- Set up long narrow folding table in foyer
- Take kentan towels and gomashio to the server table.
- Set up gomashio by placing small spoons in bowls, with the spoon bowl down. The spoons should be positioned so that handles point to the server, not the person served.
- Set up cork pads and serving utensils on the server table.

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- The soku and head server go directly to the kitchen one period before service, to complete setup and check with the Tenzo about any last details. If there are new servers or inexperienced servers, the soku can train them while the head server is completing set up.
- Make sure the servers come to the kitchen at the start of service. Distribute serving napkins to the servers, including the head server. Encourage everyone to wash or sanitize their hands thoroughly.
- Once the cook is ready, the soku lights the kitchen altar and a stick of incense for the kitchen food offering. The serving crew bows in with the kitchen crew, and the soku receives the meal-offering tray from the Tenzo. The soku carries the Buddha Tray at eye level to the table outside the zendo. Everyone bows as the tray leaves the kitchen.
- The crew carries the food to the serving table after the soku leaves with the offering. Except for gomashio, no food should go to the serving table before this formal bow.
- When all the food has been brought to the table, servers stand silently around the table.

Serving the meal (breakfast and lunch)

1. Clapper (kaishaku) rolldown: The clappers are struck immediately following the last 2 bells of the service (following the shashu bow). The rolldown is as follows:
 || || || || || || || || || || || || || || || (3 evenly spaced hits, followed by a rolldown, and 1 hit)
2. Soku and Head Server help seat people if necessary. (The teacher may direct new people to seats near experienced people.) Bring out TV trays for those in chairs, move center people to available seats on the periphery, and fold the zabutons in the center to make more space for serving.
3. When the zendo is quiet and all are seated, soku bows to servers to enter with gomashio and go directly to their assigned positions. *Servers do not bow entering or leaving the zendo.* Gomashio is served for every two persons to share (except if there is an odd number, then to one person). If there is an additional condiment, be sure to send servers in so that the first person of the pair is served gomashio.
4. Buddha tray offering: Soku has picked up the Buddha Tray while gomashio is being served and stands by the entrance to the zendo. After gomashio is served, the soku walks to the back of the bowing mat (before the chanting begins). The tray, with bowls and utensils arranged so that Manjushri is eating oryoki (bowls closest to soku's head) is held at eye level throughout the entrance and offering, with right hand on the side and left hand held flat under the side. At the back of the bowing mat, the soku bows by simply inclining the head forward; the Buddha Tray is raised very slightly during this bow; the chant begins with this soku bow. Soku then side-steps and walks to the altar, side steps in front of altar, circles the Buddha tray 3 times clockwise over the incense smoke of the kobako, bows, and places the tray on the altar. Set out the spoon and chopsticks as for eating. The soku then gasshos, sidesteps, turns inwards and walks to the back of the mat with hands in gassho, sidesteps, gasshos (this is timed with the end

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of the chant if possible, soku bows with everyone), sidesteps and then leaves the zendo with hands in gassho. For the offering and the pickup, please wear your rakusu (untucked) if you have one and do not tie back sitting robe sleeves. No watches please.

5. Serving: When most people have started taking out their chopsticks, Soku bows to the head server to begin bringing the first pot in. Servers remove the pot lids, put the serving implements in the pot, pick up the pot with thumbs below the handles, bow again, and move into position outside the zendo entrance. This opening bow is done with the first pot of the first serving and the first pot of the second serving and the water only. Remember that it will take the servers several moments to do this, so give them enough time, but not so much time that they have to wait for a long time holding heavy pots.
 - If the Tenzo has invited us to mix the second and third bowls, please announce: *“The Tenzo invites you to mix the second and third bowls”* before beginning the food serving.
 - Soku begins bowing servers into zendo after the first homage, entering on *“Lochana Buddha.”*
 - The servers moving into the zendo with the first bowl are synchronized by the soku to arrive in the first two-four positions at the same time.
 - After the first pairs at each location have been served, the servers for the second bowl/pot can enter and begin to serve.
 - The pace of the meal should move briskly.
 - Upon completing one bowl, the servers should not help out in areas not completed unless they are serving the third bowl. For the third bowl, they can serve anyone that has not been served as they are leaving and then leave the zendo.
 - The entrance with the second and third bowl of firsts is not synchronized.
 - The four positions that servers most commonly go to are: **Teacher (1), seat opposite teacher (2), Chair next to the wall (3), and Ino seat (4)**. If there are four servers, they go to these 4 positions in the above order.
 - An easy way to remember or explain serving positions is that all serving of firsts begins at the altar.
 - When serving those seated on the floor, the server kneels on at least one knee, angled slightly facing towards the altar, moving upper body to serve.
 - When serving those in chairs, server stands between people, setting down pot (1st & second pots) on the table, and moving only upper body to serve. Explain and demonstrate this for servers.
6. Kentan towel: After the meal chant is finished and everyone begins eating, the Head Server checks the time (allowing for 5 min of eating). The soku and Head Server then walk around the zendo with the kentan towel looking for spills and cleaning up if needed, beginning at positions 1 & 2. The towel is carried at serving level (forearms parallel to the floor). If offered a stray bit of food, open the towel to receive it.

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7. Following the head server's instruction during kentan, servers redistribute the food into 2 pots per bowl for seconds. Servers bring the teapots full of hot water after they have carried empty pots to the kitchen.
8. **Retrieve Buddha Tray:** Approximately 5 minutes after the end of the meal chant, the soku retrieves the Buddha tray. First the soku bows to the head server to ready the servers for seconds; then, entering in shashu, goes to the back of the bowing mat and does a gassho bow, side-steps and walks in shashu to the altar, gasshos, returns the utensils to the napkin, picks up the tray, bows the head with the tray raised to eye level; sidesteps, returns to the back of the bowing mat, side-steps, bows, sidesteps, and leaves the zendo. The tray is carried at eye level throughout.
9. Seconds: Servers should be ready to go into the zendo as soon as the soku has completed retrieving the Buddha Tray. *At this time soku announces if any of the second serving is limited.* There should be 2 servers for each bowl. Send the first to positions 1 & 2, synchronizing the servers' arrival. The pots are carried as usual and the pace is moderate. Instruct servers not to walk too slowly, not to carry the pots so as to show the food inside or to look at sitters in an inquiring way. Once servers meet, they should leave the zendo together when practical or should be sure that the other server of the same pot has seen them leave.
10. Retrieve Condiments: immediately after all the seconds are served, servers enter together with empty trays to retrieve the condiments. The soku can synchronize their entrance as usual. At this point the gomashio can be taken back to the kitchen by 1 or 2 servers, and 1 server can begin setting up the server meal if it will be taken formally.
11. Hot Water: When most people seem to be ready, send the servers in. Each server should have a folded paper napkin to use as a fulcrum for tipping the teapot.
12. Kentan towels are taken around again after the water is served.
13. Buckets: Servers enter when most people are ready; **it is not necessary to wait for the first two people at each position to finish.** The servers can return to these people if necessary. Buckets are positioned directly before the person served, with the lip of the bucket tilted slightly forward. Servers are synchronized as usual.
14. After servers leave the zendo, they quickly take everything back to the kitchen and start cleaning up. Soku then leaves the zendo and takes the Buddha tray back to the kitchen altar.
15. After the final chant: "Abiding in this ephemeral world...." and 2 clacks (kokyo) and 2 bells (doan), Soku and Head Server take the TV trays out of the zendo.

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16. The soku and head server work with servers to put things away and set up for their server meal. No more than 10 minutes of cleaning is done prior to the meal. Everyone eats together in silence whether formally or informally. *After eating* the Soku reviews the serving with the other servers.

General Soku Instructions

- Serving oryoki is a practice of gracefully and efficiently caring for our fellow practitioners. Attention should be paid to posture, feet, position, noise, pots, and attentiveness to receiver and to soku.
- Robe sleeves are not to be tied back for serving, except for priests.
- The soku should be at the zendo during the entire meal (except for very brief periods to instruct servers or to pick up tray, etc.). While the soku also is a server, they watch the progress of the meal and are available to help if needed.
- The soku is in charge of the zendo during the meal. If servers are confused or lost, the soku can come into the zendo and straighten things out.
- Synchronizing: please try to synchronize servers so that they arrive at the beginning positions together. During your instructions ask servers to watch each other so that they can adjust their pace as they walk to their positions. The soku sends the servers out in the following order:
 - Server 1 (teacher's position) begins and sets the pace;
 - Servers 2 & 3 (Person opposite teacher & the chair position in the corner of the room)
 - Server 4 (Ino's position) (see diagram)
- Head Server- Throughout the meal, the soku bows to the head server to indicate when towels, pots, teapots or buckets are needed. Please anticipate the next thing needed and have the servers at the door before it is time to bow them into the zendo.
- If someone drops a utensil or bowl, they should put their hands in gassho. The soku immediately goes over to that person (in shashu), bows, picks up the item holding it with hands in gassho and item between thumbs and forefingers, bows again, does a standing bow at the foot of the bowing mat, takes the item up to the kobako to incense it, and then returns to the person, bows, hands the item back and then both bow.

Server's Meal

- Servers bring all the pots, bowls, equipment, etc. to the kitchen and clean up until soku arrives with Buddha tray. Pots and bowls of food may be left on the center table, allowing people to come back for thirds. Servers finish cleaning up after their meal, if need be.
- The server's meals during sesshin or one-day sittings may be formal oryoki. The meal is silent, with clapper signals. **No comments about the serving are made during the meal.**
- For setup, use the long table in Dining Room. Put out hot pads for pots, serving utensils, one pot of each bowl at one end of the table, and gomashio for every 2 servers. Place the clappers by the Soku's seat. Put hot water and buckets on a separate chair at the head of the table.
- The soku hits the clappers once when everyone is ready to open their oryoki. When bowls are open, the soku gasshos to begin the serving.
- Persons on one side of the table serve the person opposite them and then to themselves and then pass the bowl to the next server. Those served should place hands in gassho when they are being served.
- All the pots end up at the far end of the table from the soku and remain there until seconds are offered.
- When serving is completed, the soku hits the clappers once and the five reflections meal chant is said (the same as dinner chant in the dining room for informal meals). Then everyone may eat.
- After 5 minutes, the soku hits the clappers once indicating that seconds may now be offered. The seconds begin from the far end of the table from the soku, and each pot is passed down toward the soku's end of the table. The side of the table that served firsts also serves seconds. If someone wants seconds, they put their hands in gassho.
- When everyone has cleaned their bowls, the soku gasshos and water is served three by three.
- Again, the soku gasshos when bowl-washing is nearly completed and the bucket is passed around, people holding the bucket for the person across from them.

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- When all the oryoki are wrapped, soku hits the clappers once and chants “Abiding in this ephemeral world...” and then hits the clappers twice to end the meal.
- The soku then discusses the serving of the zendo meal with the servers, giving instructions, reminders and clarification of the form. The Ino may come into the Dining Room to join this session or to give the Soku notes on the meal. Do not talk if retreatants on break are in the dining room.
- All servers clear the table, put everything away, and wash and put away the pots used for the servers' meal. Servers may set up the gomashio for the lunch meal, cover the tray with a clean tea towel and place the trays on the counter. Kentan towels are rinsed out, set up and placed on a dish for the next meal.
- Servers take a break the same length of time as the zendo break and then return to whatever is scheduled (i.e. returning to the work period if there is time).

Instructions for Tea/Dinner Soku (generally no formal tea during all day sittings)

Zendo Tea Setup

- If there is a Work Period, the soku and head server can set up for tea during this time.
- Ask The Tenzo where the treats are and what the alternative treat is so that everything is out and available for setup when you do it. The soku may need to do some prep work for the alternative treat (roasting nuts, slicing fruit, etc.)
- Teacups are placed right side up on the black plastic trays, which have been covered by cloth napkins. Ask the Ino how to fold these napkins if you do not know how to do this.
- The tea treat is placed on small napkins (cut to size of treat) on black trays. Please make sure there is an alternative treat available (consult with the Tenzo about this).
- Teapots are set out with 4 tea bags per pot and paper napkins folded to catch drips.
- Depending on the size of the retreat, prepare about 3-5 pots of tea. The number of pots also depends on the number of servers. An extra pot for seconds should be prepared.
- Please use mild teas; no strong herbal teas and no green or black teas.
- Remember to remove the tea bags from the pots before serving.
- The soku and/or head server can leave zazen 15 minutes before tea, add hot water to the teapots and carry everything to the server table in the foyer. Experienced servers can come out of the zendo with the soku clappers. New or inexperienced servers should be instructed during Work Period or in the period of zazen preceding tea.
- Afternoon tea: Clappers: If a period of zazen precedes tea, the soku ends that period (according to the schedule) with a clapper rolldown and one hit. If a period of kinhin precedes tea, the doan ends kinhin with one bell, but the gassho bow (when everyone is at their seat) is accompanied with the soku clapper rolldown and one hit.

Serving Tea

- If offered during a one day sitting: When the zendo is quiet and everyone is seated, send servers in with the cups.
- Sesshin: cups are served to everyone only on the first day. However, please offer cups every day. For this, the soku announces, "Please put your hands in gassho if you need a cup".

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- The treat is served next. Serving is similar to meals, except that the trays can be offered between two people and they may both take the treat together.
- When the whole zendo has been served, the kokyo will hit the clappers once to begin tea.
- Serving seconds: After leaving the zendo, servers redistribute the tea (using extra pot) for seconds. 2 or 3 minutes after firsts have begun, send the servers in with seconds (2 servers only).
- One Day Sitting: when everyone in the zendo is finished, the servers enter to collect the tea cups (and napkins/muffin cups).
- Sesshin: students keep tea cups at their seat until the last day when they are picked up after tea is over.
- The kokyo ends tea by two clapper hits, followed by two doan bells.
- Servers' tea: After bringing up cups, trays and teapots, servers have tea in the Dining Room. The service is the same as the servers' meal. The servers then rinse out the teapots, put away the trays, and place the cups in sink, ready for dishwashing.
- Servers take a short break after serving, and return to the zendo with everyone if reasonable.

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Dinner

- Serving for dinner is somewhat different. Please follow basic serving instructions with the following additions or other changes.
- Note that there are only two bowls for dinner.
- Everything used for breakfast and lunch (except gomashio) should be out on the counter in the kitchen (see list on page 1).
- Dinner soku (and head server, if necessary) can leave to prepare at the period of zazen before service and dinner. The servers can be instructed before or after tea serving (usually the same crew does both) and can come out of the zendo at the start of evening service. New servers can be trained during the Work Period.
- Serving the meal:
 1. As you hear "All Buddhas..." being chanted during service, please step into the zendo. At the end of service, the doan hits two bells for the Doshi and assembly bows. The Doshi then bows to and away from his/her seat accompanied by two bells (and the shashu bow). The soku immediately begins the clapper rolldown following the last two bells.
 2. There are no condiments for the dinner meal.
 3. After the clackers, the oryokis will be brought forward. The kokyo will then clack to signal opening of bowls. **There is no chanting and no buddha tray.**
 4. Serving: As soon as all bowls are opened and the zendo is quiet, the soku may begin to serve. **There will be no signal**, so the soku needs to pay attention to the situation in the zendo and send the servers in at the appropriate time.
 5. Kentan towel: Takes place immediately after everyone is served
 6. Seconds: Begin serving seconds about 4 1/2 minutes after the meal begins. This is approximate--please look around and determine if, generally, the zendo is ready for seconds.
 7. Hot water is served as usual.
 8. Kentan towel: Take around again.
 9. Buckets: As usual.
 10. This is the end of the meal. The soku remains in the zendo until the kokyo has hit the clappers to signal the end of the meal.

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General Serving Notes

- Serving oryoki is based on three principles: generosity, efficiency, and grace. Forms are important, but focus more on the fact that you are serving food to the sangha, and you will be able to respond appropriately.
- Servers walk quickly and energetically, but very quietly. The Soku should demonstrate how to walk quietly on the balls of the feet.
- Servers carry a napkin at their waist to wipe up spills.
- Rakusu may be folded inside the robes or put under robe belts; they should not be falling forward or in the way of food serving. **Do not reverse rakusu or wear on back.** Remove rakusu completely if it tends to fall forward. Do not wear watches.
- Pots are held with two hands. The forearms are parallel to the floor and the pot is in front, fairly close to the body. Usually the hands are held open with fingers straight and together--the hand is under the handles on the pots or holding the sides of the bowls. If the pot is very heavy it can be carried from the bottom. **Do not carry by the handles.**
- Do not hook the thumb over the top of the handle or the pot.
- Utensils: ladles, spoons and paddles in the first and second bowls are placed with the handle at 12 o'clock (with respect to the server); spoons and tongs in the third bowl are at 4 o'clock. Hold the tongs upright (rather than at an angle) while serving so that smaller, more specific portions can be given. Also, when using paddles, please pick up a spoonful in the spoon, not between paddle and spoon, so that the paddle is used to scrape off the portions desired.
- Teapots are held by the handles, the spout oriented so that the dominant hand can pour. Both hands grip the handle on top, with thumbs touching and the folded napkin is held in place by the thumbs. While pouring, the napkin is held at the juncture between the spout and the pot, and acts as a fulcrum. Also, pouring should be directed to the sides of the bowl, and not directly at the person being served. The napkin is not used to catch drips.
- Buckets are held on the sides. When collecting the spirit offering (water) hold the bucket towards the sitter (at about the position of the second bowl) and angle towards the person. Do not allow the bucket to touch people's cloths or bowls.
- Servers wait until the Soku has received the food offering to begin to take the pots and bowls to the serving table. Pots may be stacked to take to the kitchen.

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- The atmosphere around the serving table in the foyer is formal and should be as silent and as quiet as possible. While waiting, the servers stand in shashu around the table. If the Doshi walks by servers turn and gassho. When the Head Server indicates it is time to pick up the pots or bowls, servers gassho together, take off the lid and put the utensil into the pot, pick up the pot, bowl, and move to the zendo door.
- The order of the meal is:
 - (1) Clacker rolldown at end of service
 - (2) Seat people and bring in TV trays
 - (3) Gomashio &/or condiment
 - (4) Soku food offering
 - (5) Serving of food to zendo
 - (6) Between firsts and seconds, consolidate food, take pots to kitchen, turn towels, and get hot water. Head server directs this activity.
 - (7) Soku retrieves Buddha Tray
 - (8) Seconds
 - (9) Gomashio retrieved immediately
 - (10) Teapots
 - (11) Buckets
 - (12) Remove TV trays
- The Head Server will let the servers know when to pick up pots and when to go into the zendo. There will also be a short sheet with the order of serving on the serving table.
- The Soku places hands in gassho to indicate that a server should come to the entrance. Then they are given their starting position and the server immediately enters into the zendo. The servers do not bow at the door. If possible, do not talk at the door. Move immediately into the zendo when the soku bows.
- There are 4 basic positions for serving: (1) teacher, (2) opposite teacher, (3) chair in far corner, (4) ino. It is helpful to memorize these. There may be only two or 3 positions to go to depending on size of retreat. When in doubt, begin at the altar. Seconds always begin at the altar and move toward the exit.
- The soku will try to synchronize your entrance and arrival at your position for each step: the condiment, first bowl, seconds, water and buckets. The 2nd and 3rd bowl are not synchronized. Some of the timing is up to the soku, but the servers need to stay alert and watch each other, too, slowing or quickening your pace to arrive with each other.
- Be sure you have enough in your pot to serve both people a full bowl of food. If not, serve one person at a time until you don't have enough for one full bowl. Then leave the zendo, notifying the soku that you ran out as you are leaving.

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- Generally, please move quickly but be very gracious in serving--slow down when actually serving. Remember that you are in relationship while serving and wait to finish and bow before moving on or checking with the Soku. Don't try to control the amount of food someone is taking; always start with a whole spoon or ladle, serving the food very slowly if signaled for a small amount. Be generous. If people are new at receiving, don't debate a point of form. Remember that although oryoki is very practical, it is also a ceremony of giving and receiving and the servers' presence, respect, generosity and energetic alertness really set the practice tone in the zendo.
- Gomashio: the spoon handle is resting on top of the gomashio, bowl down, at 6 o'clock. The condiment goes to every two people.
- Serve two participants at a time. Arrive, stand between the 2 students and bow. Then take a small step forward and place the pot between the students (or on the TV tray for those in chairs). The first person to be served is the one closest to the altar, i.e. the direction from which you have come. Students hold the 1st and 3rd bowls over the pot or bowl to be served. The server takes the 2nd bowl from the student (with three fingers placed on bottom of their bowl), serves and then hands it back. When serving is completed, the utensil is placed back in the pot (or bowl), the pot (or bowl) is picked up, a small step backwards is taken, and the server bows with the students. If serving only one person, same as above, but stand in front of the student and put the pot to the Buddha bowl side.
- If the third bowl is served in a bowl (as opposed to a pot or a casserole), the server stands and serves from the bowl. If it is something hot, the bowl should be put on the floor/TV tray.
- If you are tall, it is best to kneel while serving people on the floor.
- When serving those seated on the floor, always go down on at least one knee or seiza if possible, angled towards the altar. Do not serve standing or hovering. Always kneel. If you cannot kneel comfortably, please tell the Soku.
- Please look at the soku when you have finished a pot to see if they have any instructions. In general, it is a good idea to periodically look at the soku to see if anything is needed. Usually, all servers help out in other parts of the zendo once they have finished their area of serving for the third pot (rather than leaving).
- Servers on their way into the zendo have the right of way over servers on their way out of the zendo. If you are carrying a pot out, stop and let the incoming people pass you.
- After serving all firsts, the servers 1) consolidate the pots. Remember that 2 pots of each bowl are needed for seconds, 2) fill and bring teapots of water, 3) bring extra pots back

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to kitchen. Please do all of this quietly. The Head Server will indicate who is to do what.

- Leave only if the Head Server has designated you to do so. Please do not leave the area during any other time unless head server assigns you to set up server's meal.
- Walk at a brisk pace while serving seconds. People will be paying attention and will signal (gassho) if they want seconds. Do not walk too slowly. Don't scan everyone's face to see if there is a hint that they might want seconds. Don't tip the pot toward the tan to show what's in it. People will know which pot it is. Just keep things moving.
- Don't pour the water from one bucket to another in the foyer because the sound is heard in the zendo.
- As soon as the water is collected, start taking everything to the kitchen. A server's oryoki meal follows and then all servers and the soku help clean up the pots the servers used and put everything away.

Server's Short List

1. Serve with generosity, efficiency, and grace.
2. Walk quietly and quickly in zendo.
3. Carry pots in hands, below the handles. No thumbs above handles or in pots or bowls.
4. Keep track of the right of way.
5. Serve efficiently, filling the serving utensil to offer enough the first time.
6. Watch signals from person served and from the soku.
7. For floor serving, kneel angled towards the altar.
8. Tea pots held three inches above middle of bowl.
9. Buckets held in front of oryoki bowls and slightly tilted.