

On ‘Refrain from All Evil Whatsoever’

(Shoaku Makusa)

Translator’s Introduction: In this discourse, Dōgen discusses the significance of a poem that appears in Chinese translations of the Pali *Āgama Scriptures*, the earliest known Buddhist Scriptures. Although they are part of the Theravadan tradition, they are nevertheless viewed as fundamental to Mahayana Buddhism. The poem is considered to encapsulate the Precepts, which form the moral basis for the actions of a Buddhist. Although there have been various interpretations of this poem over the centuries, this English translation reflects Dōgen’s particular understanding of the Chinese version. After Dōgen has presented the significance of each of the four lines of the poem, he then explores the appropriate attitude of mind towards these Preceptual Teachings by means of a story concerning Haku Rakuten, whom the Japanese have traditionally regarded as the greatest of the Chinese poets.

The Buddha of long ago said in verse:

*Refrain from all evil whatsoever,
Uphold and practice all that is good,
And thereby you purify your own intentions:
This is what all Buddhas teach.*

These are the Precepts that the Seven Buddhas* and all the Ancestors of our Tradition have held in common. They are passed down from a previous Buddha directly to the next Buddha: They are what a Buddha inherits from a preceding Buddha. This refers not only to the Seven Buddhas, for these Precepts are what all Buddhas teach. You should examine Them with the mind of meditation and thoroughly investigate the principles They voice.

When mention is made of ‘the Dharma voiced by the Seven Buddhas’, it is doubtless a reference to this Teaching which the Seven Buddhas have given voice to. Moreover, what is passed on and what is inherited is precisely what is being communicated here through this Scriptural verse. It is ‘what all Buddhas teach’. It is what the hundreds of thousands of millions of Buddhas have been instructed in, what They have practiced, and what They have personally come to realize.

* See *Glossary*.



The 'all evil' of which we are now speaking has the quality of 'being evil' among the three qualities of 'being good', 'being evil', and 'being neutral'.¹ This quality of 'being evil' is something that does not arise and perish, as thoughts and things do. Although the qualities of 'being good' and 'being neutral' are also beyond arising, as well as being without stain and bearing the characteristics of the Truth, these three qualities, in each instance, are quite diverse in form and character.

'All evil' is not exactly the same as what is considered wrong among us in the monastic community or among those in the mundane world, nor is it exactly the same as what was thought of as evil in the past or what is thought to be so in the present. And it is not exactly the same as what is considered evil among the lofty or among ordinary, everyday human beings. And vast indeed is the difference between the way that good, evil, and neutral are spoken of in Buddhism and the way they are spoken of in the world of ordinary, everyday people. What is seen as good and what is seen as evil depend on the times, but time itself is neither good nor evil. What is good and what is evil depend on what thoughts and things they give rise to, but whatever arises is likewise inherently neither good nor evil. To the extent that thoughts or things are alike, they partake of good alike, and to the extent that they are alike, they partake of evil alike.

Nevertheless, while we are pursuing our study of That which is 'absolute, supreme enlightenment', while we are listening to instruction on It, while we are training and practicing until we personally experience the fruits of realizing It, It seems something profound, something remote, something mysterious. We hear of this peerless enlightenment from our good spiritual friends and we learn of It from Scriptures. And the first thing we hear is, "Refrain from all evil whatsoever." If you do not hear it said to refrain from all evil whatsoever, it is not the genuine Dharma of Buddha: it will be the preaching of demons. You must understand that to hear "Refrain from all evil whatsoever" is to hear what the genuine Dharma of Buddha is.

This "Refrain from all evil whatsoever" is not something that worldly people are apt to think of before concocting what they are going to do. Only by hearing enlightenment explained to them will they be able to learn of this phrase. When

1. These three qualities refer to the nature of one's intentions and actions, as well as to the karmic consequences these intentions and actions set in motion. When the nature of one's intentions or actions is good, these intentions and actions produce good karmic effects; when evil, evil effects; when neutral, effects that are neither good nor evil.

they hear of it in this way, it will merely be words related to supreme enlightenment. At this time, enlightenment will be for them only a word, and so the word 'enlightenment' is used. But when these people turn themselves around upon hearing supreme enlightenment being talked about, they will wish to refrain from all evil whatsoever, and they will act to refrain from all evil whatsoever. Once they have arrived at the point where they are no longer doing all manner of evil, the strength from their training and practice will immediately manifest itself before their very eyes. This blossoming of strength will extend beyond all places, all worlds, all times, all things. And the measuring of it will take 'refraining' as its yardstick.

Those who have arrived at this point in time may reside in some place where all manner of evil is going on, or they may be traveling back and forth there, or they may be confronted with conditions where all manner of evil actions may be going on, yet they do not perform such evil actions themselves because they are clearly manifesting the strength from their self-restraint. They do not speak of evil actions as, in and of themselves, evil actions, for there is no such thing as a predestined 'tool for evil'. At such a point in time, the principle that evil does not break a person will be understood: the principle that a person does not defeat evil will be crystal clear.

Rouse your heart and mind fully and do your training and practice, for when you rouse your heart and mind to do the training and practice, you will have already realized eight- or nine-tenths of the Way. Before you know it, you will have 'refraining' always in the back of your mind. Whether you pay heed to your own handling of mind and body whilst doing your training and practice, or pay heed to someone else's handling of mind and body whilst they are doing their training and practice, the strength from your practice and training with the four elements and the five skandhas* will instantly manifest before your very eyes. At such a time, the four elements and the five skandhas will not sully you; even with the four elements and the five skandhas being just as they are at the present time, your training and practice can go on. The strength from the four elements and the five skandhas, just as they are in our present training and practice, has been brought about through our previous training and practice with the four elements and the five skandhas.

Moreover, when we train and practice upon the great earth with its mountains and rivers, and beneath the sun, moon, and stars, then the great earth with its mountains and rivers, as well as the sun, moon, and stars, will help us to train ourselves and to do the practice. It is not a matter of being clear-eyed at one time: it is having your Eye open at all times. Because the Buddhas and Ancestors were clear-eyed, with Their Eye open at all times, It helped Them to do the training

and practice, just as It helped Them to hear and heed what the Scriptures teach and to bring Their spiritual certainty to fruition. Because the Buddhas and Ancestors have never let the Scriptural teachings, Their practice, or Their certainty be sullied, these things have never stood in the way of any Buddha or Ancestor. This is why, in the training and practice of Buddhas and Ancestors, there are no Buddhas or Ancestors who have avoided or turned away from these three aspects or ever would, be it in the past, present, or future. At the time when a sentient being 'becomes' a Buddha or an Ancestor, the Buddhas and Ancestors that have existed previously do not hinder or act as obstacles to Him or Her. Even so, we must consider carefully the principle of 'becoming a Buddha' as we walk, stand, sit, or recline throughout the twenty-four hours of a day. Becoming a Buddha or Ancestor does not tear a sentient being to bits, or rob him of anything, or deprive him of something. It is simply his letting go.

The karmic* consequences of our good and bad actions are what we are training with. That is, we try not to set karmic consequences into motion or not to stir things up. There is a time when karmic consequences are what cause us to do the training and practice. Once the true face of our karma has been made clear to us, then we understand what 'refraining' really means, for this refraining is what Buddha Nature is: it is being impermanent, it is being subject to causality, and it is being free, because it is letting go. When we study the matter in this manner, we will bring about a state where we will completely refrain from all evil. To actualize this, we are helped by focusing on refraining from all evil until we succeed in penetrating to its heart, which is our sitting in meditation until we are able to sever ourselves from what is evil.

When we have actualized "Refrain from all evil whatsoever" from beginning to end, then, at such a point in time, there is just refraining, since evil is not something that arises from karmic causes and conditions. And since evil is not something that disappears along with karmic causes and conditions, there is just refraining, simply that. Were all evils alike, then all physical and mental things would be alike. If you suppose that evils arise due to some karmic cause or condition and do not see that such a cause or condition is, in itself, 'something not to be done', you are folks to be pitied. Just as the seed of Buddhahood comes along with the arising of co-existing conditions, so co-existing conditions will come along with the appearance of the seed of Buddhahood.

It is not that there are no evils: it is only that there are things that one should not do. It is not that there are evils: it is only that there are things that one should not do. It is not that evils are lacking in form: it is simply that they are things not to be done. It is not that evils have some particular form: simply they are things not to be done. Evils are not 'things that one should not do': they are simply things one

does not do. For instance, it is not a matter of whether the springtime pine 'has existence' or 'does not have existence': the pine tree is simply a thing that we do not invent. It is not that the autumn chrysanthemum 'exists' or 'does not exist': this flower is something that we have not fabricated. Whether Buddhas exist or do not exist, there are things we do not do. Whether or not there is a round temple pillar, or a stone lantern, or a ceremonial hossu, or a traveling staff,² there are things we do not do. It is not a matter of whether we have existence or not: it is a matter of refraining from things not to be done.

Our studying in this way will be our spiritual question manifesting right in front of us. Since it is a manifestation of our spiritual question, we should meditate on this from the perspectives of both the host and the guest. As regards what you have already done, to have done what you should not have done will create remorse in you. Even so, do not evade such feelings, since facing them will, in turn, prove to be a strength for you, a strength that arises from your training in refraining. Accordingly, should you head off in the direction of thinking, "If it is something I should not do, I ought to give it a try to see what it's like," you will be like someone going north to arrive at the south. To refrain from all evil whatsoever is not just the well looking at the donkey: it is the well looking at the well, the donkey looking at the donkey, the ordinary person looking at the ordinary person, the mountain looking at the mountain.³ Because the cases spoken of here share a principle which, at bottom, is in accord with each of them, they all involve refraining from all evil.

*The true Dharma Body of the Buddha
Is unbounded, like empty space.
It reveals Its form in accordance with an object,
Like the moon reflected in water.*

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2. These four items are associated with a Meditation Master, one who serves as the fundamental support for his or her temple or monastery, who is a guiding light for his or her disciples, who pours forth the Water of the Spirit for their spiritual benefit, and who is willing to travel anywhere literally and figuratively to help sentient beings arrive at the Other Shore.
 3. An allusion to a remark by Meditation Master Sōzan Honjaku that when a donkey looks into the well, the well looks at the donkey. The donkey here refers to the stubborn mind of the trainee (the guest position), and the well to That which he looks into in training. While he is looking into this Well, the Well (the host position) is 'looking at' the donkey. It is also the ordinary mind looking at the ordinary mind, and it is the mind in meditation looking at the mind of meditation.

Because this refraining is done in accordance with what an object is, it is a refraining that takes various forms. It resembles empty space, which is the same wherever you point, right or left. It is like the moon in water: the moon is not hampered by the water. Furthermore, these cases of refraining will, beyond doubt, manifest before your very eyes.



“Uphold and practice all that is good.” This ‘all that is good’ refers to the quality of ‘being good’ among the three qualities. Although ‘all that is good’ resides within the quality of ‘being good’, it does not mean that what is good already exists somewhere and is waiting for someone to put it into operation. At the very moment when someone does good, nothing but good comes forth. Although the myriad expressions of goodness are without an outer form, when good is done, it attracts goodness faster than a magnet attracts iron. Its strength surpasses that of the Great Storming Wind.⁴ Even the strength amassed by the karma from the great earth with its mountains and rivers, as well as from the world with its nations and countries, will never hinder the accumulating of good.

Even so, what is good depends on what ‘world’ you are talking about, for it will not always be perceived as being the same thing, since people consider what ‘good’ is from their own perspective. It is also like this when Buddhas give voice to the Dharma in the three temporal worlds. What They give voice to is the same, but how It was voiced when Each was in the world has depended on the times. Even though Their length of life and the number of Buddhas may vary over time, what They all give voice to is the Teaching of non-discriminatory thinking.

This is why what is seen to be good from the perspective of practicing in faith and what is seen to be good from the perspective of practicing in accordance with the Dharma vary so widely, yet they are not separate Teachings.⁵ For instance,

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4. This wind, whose raging is capable of destroying all in its path, arises beyond the Iron Mountains which surround and protect Mount Sumeru. This is an allusion to the worst, most powerful form of karmic consequence which, like a storm, is capable of destroying ordinary human beings physically and mentally. However, the Iron Mountains (when understood as a metaphor for Buddhist practitioners sitting unmoved in their meditation) form a protective spiritual barrier against such a destructive force for the trainee who is meditating ‘atop Mount Sumeru’.
 5. That is, what is good from the perspective of meditation (sitting in complete faith and trust) and the good which is derived from applying what the Buddha taught in the form of the Precepts may sometimes superficially appear to be different, but when meditation and practice are properly undertaken, they are seen to be all one identical Dharma.

it is like the situation of a shravaka's holding to the Precepts being a breaking of the Precepts in a bodhisattva.⁶

'All that is good' is independent of what karmically arises and what karmically undergoes dissolution. 'All that is good' is synonymous with 'all thoughts and things', yet all such things are not necessarily good. Since the cycles of karmic conditions, that which arises and ceases with them, and 'all good' are alike in having a beginning, so they will also have their ending. Although 'all good' is what we uphold and practice, since it is not of the self, it is not known via the self; since it is not of others, it is not known via others. When speaking of consciousness of self and other, there is a self and an other in what is known; there is a self and an other in what is seen. Hence, each and every Eye that has opened to the Truth, when activated, will have Its Sun and Its Moon: this is what is meant by 'upholding and putting into practice'.

At the very moment of our upholding and practicing, there will be the spiritual question arising before our eyes. Even so, it will not be the first time that it has manifested nor will the question remain indefinitely, continuing on, nor can we possibly say that it is the fundamental practice.

Although, as I have said, the doing of what is good is what we uphold and practice, it is not something to be speculated upon or intellectually analyzed. Even though the upholding and practicing of which I now speak are, indeed, the activities of the Eye That has opened to the Truth, it is not a subject for speculation. It is not something that has manifested for the purpose of our speculating on the Dharma. The conclusions drawn by the opened Eye will not be the same as those drawn by other things.

'All that is good' does not depend on something having existence or not having existence, on something having form or being devoid of form, and so forth. It is simply what is upheld and practiced. No matter where it manifests, no matter when it manifests, it is what we uphold and practice, without fail. This adherence and practice will manifest what is good, without fail. Even though our adherence and practice are what manifest because of our spiritual question, 'all that is good' lies beyond birth, beyond annihilation, beyond any karmic conditions. The same

6. That is, someone who is new to training and has just begun to try to live in accordance with the Precepts (that is, a 'shravaka') may need to hold closely to the literal meaning of them. However, in someone whose training and practice have advanced to the point where he or she is naturally acting from the Precepts as their very blood and bones (that is, a 'bodhisattva'), this 'holding on tightly' is precisely what could work against the intent of the Precepts if the trainee were to apply them as a rigid yardstick, thereby opening the door to judgmentalism.

holds true for our entering into adherence and practice, our persisting in them, our departing from them, and so forth. When, from among all of our acts, even a single good act is upheld and practiced, the goodness of every single thing in its totality—all of which together form the ground of reality—is upheld and put into practice.

The causes and effects of this goodness have, likewise, sprung from our spiritual question, which we have actualized by our adherence to and practice of what is good. Although it is not a matter of cause necessarily preceding effect, both cause and effect will be fully perfected. When the causes are alike, the thoughts and things they give rise to will be alike: when effects are alike, then it is because the thoughts and things have been alike. Although depending upon the cause we feel effects, it is not a matter of 'before and after', because 'before' and 'after' are merely ways of speaking.



In the statement, "You purify your own intentions," the 'you' is the 'you' that refrains, the 'purifying' is the purifying by refraining, the 'own' is the 'own' of yourself, the 'intention' is the intention that you have. The 'your own' is the 'your own' that refrains, the 'intention' is the intention to refrain. 'Intention' is 'the intention to uphold and practice', 'to purify' is 'to purify by upholding and practicing', 'your own' is 'your own adherence to practice', the 'you' is the 'you that upholds and practices'. This is why it is said, "This is what all Buddhas teach."

All Buddhas may resemble gods like Ishvara, the Indian creator of the world. Although They have some things in common with Ishvara, all such gods are not Buddhas. They also resemble sovereign, Wheel-turning Lords.* However, it cannot be said that all those holy sovereign lords are Buddhas. We must carefully study the principle enunciated here. Although it seems that there are people who fail to examine what 'all Buddhas' means and thereby create suffering for themselves—and to no good purpose—nevertheless, this is simply suffering from being a sentient being; it has nothing to do with practicing the Way to Buddhahood. 'Refraining from' together with 'upholding and putting into practice' means "Before all the donkey matters have passed, horse matters have already arrived."⁷



The poet Haku Rakuten of the T'ang dynasty was a lay disciple of Meditation Master Bukkō Nyoman, who was a Dharma heir of Baso. When

7. That is, refraining from evil (which trains the stubborn 'donkey') is not something to be completed before beginning to practice good (putting the willing 'horse' to use.)

Rakuten was governor of Hangchow, he trained under Meditation Master Dōrin of Chōka.

Rakuten once asked Dōrin, “Just what is the major intention of the Buddha Dharma?”

Dōrin replied, “Refrain from all evil whatsoever; uphold and practice all that is good.”

Rakuten remarked, “If that’s all there is to it, even a child of three knows how to say that!”

Dōrin replied, “Though a three-year-old child can say it, there are old men in their eighties who still cannot put it into practice.”

Upon hearing the matter put this way, Rakuten then bowed in gratitude.

Rakuten was actually a descendant of General Haku. Even so, he was a wizard of a poet, the likes of which is rare in any generation. People refer to him as ‘the literary genius of twenty-four generations’. Some have called him a veritable Manjushri;* others, a Maitreya, the Buddha-next-to-come. There is no one who has not heard of his personality; everyone in the world of letters pays court to him. Even so, when it comes to the Buddha’s Way, he was a beginner, a youngster. Furthermore, it was as if he had never even dreamt of the meaning of “Refrain from all evil whatsoever; uphold and practice all that is good.” Rakuten thought that in saying to refrain from all evil and practice all good, Dōrin was looking at the matter from the perspective of an ordinary, everyday person’s way of thinking. Rakuten had failed to grasp the principle of refraining from evil and practicing good—a principle which has existed in Buddhism from ancient-most times and has extended even to the present—nor had he ever even heard of it; consequently he did not tread where the Buddha Dharma is. Lacking the strength of the Buddha Dharma, he said what he did. Even so, when we refrain from evil or practice good as understood by ordinary, everyday people, it will still be our actualizing of ‘refraining’.

For the most part, what we first learn about Buddhism from a good spiritual friend and what we bring to fruition through our diligent practice are both one and the same. We describe this as ‘learning, from start to finish’. It is also called ‘the wondrous cause and the wondrous effect’, as well as ‘the cause of seeking Buddhahood and the effect of seeking Buddhahood’. Cause and effect in Buddhism should not be confused with such notions as ‘effects are totally unrelated to their cause’ and ‘cause and effect are exactly the same thing’, because these notions are not what is meant by ‘seeking Buddhahood’, and they will not achieve the effect of

seeking Buddhahood. Because Dōrin enunciated this principle, he 'possessed' the Buddha Dharma.

Were evil to pile upon evil and spread throughout the whole world, absorbing everything into its mass, 'emancipation through refraining' would still hold true. Since all that is good is already good—beginning, middle, and end—the nature, characteristics, form, and strength of upholding and practicing it will likewise be good. Rakuten had never walked in such footsteps, which is why he said, "Even a child of three knows how to say that!" He said this because he was lacking in the strength to realize the Way. Poor, pitiful Rakuten, why did you say such a thing?

Since Rakuten had not yet got wind of what Buddhism is really about, it is unlikely that he was truly acquainted with any three-year-olds or with what such a child is naturally capable of. If someone can truly understand a three-year-old, he will surely know all the Buddhas of the three temporal worlds. If someone does not yet know all the Buddhas of the three temporal worlds, how will he be able to understand a three-year-old? Do not imagine that you understand such a child just because you have met one face-to-face. Do not think that you do not know such a child just because you have not met one face-to-face. He who knows but a single mote of dust knows the whole world: he who fully comprehends one thing comprehends all the myriad things that comprise the universe. He who fails to comprehend all the myriad things will not comprehend even one of them. When someone has fully trained himself in this principle of comprehending and has reached full comprehension, he will not only see the myriad things that comprise the universe but will also see each one of them. This is why the person who studies one mote of dust will undoubtedly be studying the whole universe. To think that a three-year-old child cannot give voice to the Buddha Dharma or to think that a three-year-old is 'cute' is the height of foolishness. This is because clarifying what birth is and clarifying what death is constitutes the most important matter for a Buddhist monk.

A virtuous elder once said, "When you were born, you were provided with the lion's roar." Being provided with the lion's roar is the meritorious fruit of a Tathagata's turning of the Wheel of the Dharma: it is the turning of the Wheel of the Dharma. And another virtuous elder said, "The coming and going of birth and death is the Real Body of man." Thus it is that clarifying what one's True Body is and possessing the merit from the lion's roar will indeed be the One Great Matter,* and I do not mean that the task is easy or simple. Hence, attempting to clarify what prompts the words and actions of a three-year-old is also the Great Cause for which we train, since it is the same—and yet not the same—as what prompts the words and actions of all the Buddhas in the three temporal worlds.

Befuddled Rakuten had never heard what a three-year-old child had to say, and so he had never questioned himself as to what the Great Matter was. Instead, he made the kind of remark that he did. He did not hear what Dōrin was voicing, though It resounded louder than thunder. In speaking of That which cannot be put into words, Rakuten said, “Even a child of three knows how to say that!” Not only did he not hear the child’s lion roar, he also stumbled over the Master’s turning of the Wheel of the Dharma.

The Master, out of pity, could not give up on Rakuten and went on to say, “Though a three-year-old child can say it, there are old men in their eighties who still cannot put it into practice.” The heart of what he said exists in what a child of three can say, and this we must thoroughly investigate. Also, there is the practice which eighty-year-olds may not be doing, but which we must diligently engage in. What Dōrin has told us is that what the child is capable of saying has been entrusted to us, though it is not a task for a child, and what the old men were not able to practice has been entrusted to us, though it was not the task for old men such as these. In a similar way do we keep the Buddha’s Dharma in mind and take It as our foundation, so that we may make It our reason for training.

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Ejō