

## On Expressing What One Has Realized

(*Dōtoku*)

**Translator’s Introduction:** While ‘*dōtoku*’, the key term in this discourse, can be translated in various ways, all point to the same matter, namely, the way in which someone expresses, often through words, what has been realized spiritually. This is different from experiencing a psychological insight or having an intellectual comprehension.

All the Buddhas and all the Ancestors express what They have realized. This is why the Buddhas and Ancestors, when singling out an Ancestor of the Buddha, invariably ask, “Can that person express their realization or not?” They ask this question with Their heart and mind, with Their body, with Their traveling staff and ceremonial hossu, and as a pillar of Their temple and as a stone lantern.<sup>1</sup> For those who are not Buddhas or Ancestors, the question does not arise. The matter of their expressing what they have realized does not arise because such a state does not exist for them.

Expressing what one has realized is an ability that is not to be had by keeping in step with other people, nor is it some innate talent; simply, whenever trainees thoroughly practice the Way of the Buddhas and Ancestors, then they will be able to express what Buddhas and Ancestors have realized. While expressing Their realization for others, the Buddhas and Ancestors of the past continued Their training and practice, and thereby thoroughly awoke to the Way. In the present, we should also do our meditation wholeheartedly and do our utmost to practice the Way. When Ancestors of the Buddha wholeheartedly do the meditation of Buddhas and Ancestors and undertake to put into practice the Truth that the Buddhas and Ancestors have expressed, Their expression of what They have realized represents the effort of three years, or eight years, or thirty or forty years, as They express what They have realized with all Their might.

Within these time spans, however many decades long they may have been, there has been no disparity in how ‘such a one’\* has expressed what he or she has realized. Thus, when you become fully awake, what you will realize through your

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1. Please see the *Glossary* for the symbolic meanings of the last four terms in this sentence.

\* See *Glossary*.

direct encounter with It will be the Truth. Because this encounter confirms as true the direct encounters of former times, when we now express what we have realized, it is beyond doubt. Thus, our expressing what we have realized in the present is supported by That which we directly met with in former times, and we support That which we directly met with in former times by expressing our realization today. This is why we can now express what we have realized, for we have personally met with It through our own experience. The expression of our realization in the present and our direct seeing in the past are as a single iron bar whose ends are ten thousand miles apart.<sup>2</sup> Our present efforts are directed by what we have realized of the Way and by what we have personally encountered.

We pile up long months and many years of keeping to these efforts, and what is more, we cease to cling to our past efforts over the months and years. When we attempt to let go, our skin, flesh, bones, and marrow alike strive to let go. And along with them, the land we live in with its mountains and rivers also strives to let go. At this time, while we are striving to let go so that we may arrive at the Ultimate Treasured Place, our effort to arrive fully comes forth, and, as a result, at the very moment of letting go, we will spontaneously express our realization as it immediately manifests before our very eyes. Even though it is said to be beyond the power of our body and mind, we will, nevertheless, spontaneously express what we have realized. Once our realization has occurred, we see that it is not something curious or strange.

Be that as it may, when you use words to express what you have realized, you will leave unsaid whatever is inexpressible through words. Even if you can see that you have indeed expressed what you have realized, if you have not realized that not all things can be verbally expressed, then you will lack the look of the Buddhas and Ancestors, and you will lack the Bones and Marrow of the Buddhas and Ancestors. As a consequence, how could Eka's expressing his realization by doing three prostrations before Bodhidharma and then standing silently in his place possibly be equaled by that bunch who are stuck on 'skin, flesh, bones and marrow'?<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, the understanding of that bunch who are stuck on 'skin,

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2. That is, they are fundamentally one and the same, while appearing as if they were totally separate.
  3. The allusion here is to what occurred with the four disciples of Bodhidharma, three of whom expressed their understanding of their Master's Teaching verbally, whereas Eka, the fourth, bowed to the Master whilst remaining silent. Each disciple, in turn, was described by Bodhidharma as having realized one of four attributes: the Master's Skin, the Master's Flesh, the Master's Bones, and the Master's Marrow. In the present context, Dōgen is alluding to the literal-minded who are stuck with the notion that 'Skin, Flesh, Bones, and

flesh, bones and marrow’ does not even come close to Eka’s understanding, as expressed by his doing three prostrations before Bodhidharma and then standing in his place, much less were any of that bunch equipped with what Eka had. Those whom we encounter right now as we do our practice amidst different kinds of sentient beings are just like those whom Eka encountered in the past as he did his practice amidst different kinds of sentient beings.<sup>4</sup> For us, there is a basis for our verbally expressing what we have realized and a basis for our not verbally expressing what we have realized. And for Eka, there was a basis for his verbally expressing what he had realized and a basis for his not verbally expressing what he had realized. And for that bunch, there is a ‘self and other’ in what they say and a ‘self and other’ in what they do not say.



Great Master Jōshū Shinsai, in instructing his assembly, once said, “If you were to spend your whole life not leaving the monastery, sitting as still as a mountain and not saying a word for five or ten years, no one would call you a mute, and later on, not even the Buddhas would be your equal!”<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, when you reside in a monastery for five or ten years as the frosts of winter and the flowers of summer, time and again, pass you by, and when you esteem doing your utmost to practice the Way whilst spending your whole life without leaving the monastery even once, then your sitting as still as a mountain, which severs the roots of your dualistic thinking, will, before long, be an expression of your realization. Your walking, sitting, and reclining whilst not leaving the monastery will be instances of no one calling you a mute. Even though we do not know what our whole life will be like, if we make our lifetime one of not physically leaving the monastery, this will be our way of ‘not leaving the monastery’. And what path

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Marrow’ represent four spiritual states in ascending order of superiority, rather than recognizing that each of the four disciples had obtained the substance of Bodhidharma’s Teaching.

4. ‘Doing one’s practice amidst sentient beings’ is a Zen Buddhist phrase referring to helping sentient beings reach the Other Shore, particularly those sentient beings whose perception of things is alien to the Buddhist Way.
5. Throughout this text, the word ‘monastery’ can be understood literally as referring to the physical place where trainees come in order to train together and figuratively as one’s place of training, which is wherever one does the practice.

In the present context, the Zen Buddhist term ‘*akan*’, translated here as ‘a mute’, refers to a thoroughly inexperienced trainee who is unable to say even a word in response to a Master’s question.

through the trackless sky could one traverse in order to go beyond such terms as ‘our whole life’ and ‘a monastery’? So, simply strive to sit as still as a mountain, and do not speak of ‘not expressing It through words’. ‘Not expressing It through words’ is a way of expressing It that is correct from beginning to end.

Sitting as still as a mountain is for a whole lifetime, or for two whole lifetimes: it is not just for one or two occasions. When you have spent five or ten years in sitting as still as a mountain without saying a word, even the Buddhas will not think lightly of you. Truly, when you are sitting as still as a mountain without saying a word, even the Eyes of Buddhas will be unable to catch a glimpse of you, and even the strength of a Buddha will be unable to make you sway. At such a time, even the Buddhas will be unable to equal you.

Jōshū said that the expression ‘sitting as still as a mountain’ is beyond anything that even the Buddhas would call ‘being a mute’, and it is also beyond anything that They would call ‘not being a mute’. Accordingly, a whole life spent without leaving the monastery is a life spent wholly expressing what one has realized. Sitting as still as a mountain without saying a word for five or ten years is synonymous with expressing what one has realized for five or ten years. It is a whole life spent without departing from ‘not verbally expressing’ what one has realized, and it is a whole lifetime of five or ten years, and it is hundreds and thousands of Buddhas sitting to cut off Their dualistic thinking, and it is hundreds and thousands of Buddhas sitting to cut Themselves free from a ‘self’.

Thus, the basis of the Buddhas’ and Ancestors’ expressing Their realization is Their spending Their whole life in not leaving the monastery. Even if you were a mute, you would still have this as a basis for expressing what you have realized, so do not draw the conclusion that a mute cannot have a way of expressing what he has realized. The person who has a way of expressing what he has realized is not necessarily someone who is not a mute, since a mute, too, has his way of expressing what he has realized. You need to be able to hear His mute voice: you need to listen to His mute words. If you are not mute, how can you possibly meet with a Mute, or converse with a Mute? Given that That Person is as silent as a mute, how are we to meet with Him or converse with Him? Exploring the Matter\* in this way, you should thoroughly put into practice being as silent as a mute.



There was a monk in the assembly of Great Master Seppō Shinkaku who went just outside the mountain monastery and built himself a hermit’s thatched hut. Though the years accumulated, he did not shave his head. Who can know what

kind of life went on within that hut? As a rule, life within the mountains was depressing indeed.

He had fashioned a dipper out of wood and would go to the nearby ravine to get water for drinking. Truly, he must have been the sort who drinks from ravines. Consequently, as the days came and the nights passed, word of his customary habits leaked out, so that one day a monk came and asked him, “Why was it that the Ancestral Master Bodhidharma came here from the West?” The hermit replied, “Since the ravine is so deep, the handle of my dipper is long.”

The inquiring monk was so dumbfounded that he left without bowing or asking the hermit for elucidation. Climbing back up the mountain, he recounted the event to Seppō. When Seppō heard the account, he said, “How wondrously strange! Even if it is as you say, this old monk will go and see for himself. By testing him, I’ll get to the bottom of this, right off.”

The heart of what Seppō said is that the merit of the hermit’s remark was excellent, right up to the point of being wondrous, and even so, the old monk Seppō needed to go and see for himself. So, one day Seppō suddenly set off, asking his personal attendant to come along with a razor. He straightway arrived at the hermit’s hut. No sooner had he spotted the hermit than he asked him, “If you can say what you have realized, should I not shave your head?”

We need to get to the heart of this question. “If you can say what you have realized, should I not shave your head?” can also be understood as “My not shaving your head means that you have a way of expressing the Matter,” right? If the hermit’s way of expressing what he has realized really did express the Matter, Seppō, in the last analysis, would not shave him. Those who have the capacity to hear this expression of the Matter need to listen, and should also clearly expound it for the sake of others who have the capacity to listen.

The hermit then washed his head and came before Seppō. Had he come as his way of expressing what he had realized or had he come as his way of not expressing what he had realized? Whichever the case, Seppō, accordingly, shaved the hermit’s head.

This one episode is like the blossoming of an udumbara flower;<sup>6</sup> not only is it something rarely met with, it is rarely even heard about. It goes beyond the realm of the seven times saintly or the ten times saintly: it goes beyond what is glimpsed by the thrice wise or the seven times wise.\* Those who are academic teachers of Scripture and writers of erudite commentaries, along with that bunch who crave mystical or magical powers, cannot fathom it at all. When we speak of

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6. The udumbara flower is said to blossom only once in every three thousand years.

encountering the emergence of a Buddha into the world, we are speaking of hearing a story like this one.

Now, what could Seppō's remark, "If you can say what you have realized, should I not shave your head?" really mean? When people who have not yet given expression to the Truth hear this story, those who are capable may be startled and doubt their ability, whereas those who are not yet capable may be completely bewildered. Seppō did not ask the hermit about 'Buddha', nor did he speak of 'the Way': he did not ask him about deep meditative states, nor did he speak of invocations.<sup>7</sup> Even though his inquiring as he did resembles asking a question, it is actually analogous to an assertion. You should explore this in detail through your training.

The hermit, though, had the look of the Genuine about him, so he could not help but give expression to the Dharma for the sake of others by his way of expressing what he had realized, and, as a result, he was not bewildered by Seppō's remark. He did not seek to go back into seclusion, as was his customary way, but washed his head and came forth. This is an expression of Buddha Dharma whose boundaries not even the wisdom of the Buddha Himself can reach. Expressing It can take the form of manifesting the Body, or giving voice to the Dharma, or rescuing sentient beings from their suffering, or washing one's head and coming forth.

Now then, if Seppō had not been the spiritually Real Person that he was, he would probably have thrown down the razor and burst out into gales of laughter. But Seppō had the essential spiritual strength and was that kind of Real Person, so he shaved the hermit's head. Truly, if Seppō and the hermit had not been 'Buddhas on Their own, together with all Buddhas', it could not have been like this; if they had not been 'one and the same Buddha, and also two Buddhas', it could not have been like this; if they had not been one dragon meeting another, it could not have been like this. The Black Dragon vigilantly guards the black pearl that He prizes so highly, and yet it naturally rolls into the hands of one who knows how to receive it.

Keep in mind that when Seppō tested the hermit, the hermit saw who Seppō really was. In expressing what was realized without saying what was realized, the one was shaved and the other did the shaving. Accordingly, there are pathways whereby good spiritual friends who express the Truth unexpectedly meet each

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7. Discussing 'Buddha' and 'the Way' refers to the intellectualizing of Buddhism by scholarly commentators and academic teachers of Scriptural texts, whereas deep meditative states and invocations are areas that those seeking magical powers are apt to get into. An invocation is a phrase having spiritual significance, which is sometimes chanted as part of a trainee's ceremonial practice.

other. And among friends who claim that they have not realized anything, there have been occasions when they have recognized the True Self, even though they had no expectations of doing so. When you undertake through your training to recognize the True Self, you will express what you have realized when It manifests before your very eyes.

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*Ejō*