

On Functioning Fully

(Zenki)

Translator's Introduction: As the postscript at the end of this discourse indicates, this talk was given by Dōgen not only for the benefit of his monastic community but also for the benefit of his lay followers, including his major lay patron, the Governor of Izumi Province. The discourse has an underlying assumption which may not be immediately evident to Western readers, namely that all humans have Buddha Nature, and indeed, are Buddha Nature, and that Buddha Nature is our True Self. Thus, even though we may not yet have recognized that this is the case, nevertheless our Buddha Nature is constantly functioning as Buddha Nature at all times, in life and in death, never ceasing or disappearing or lying dormant, ever displaying Itself right before our very eyes.

When we thoroughly explore what the Great Way of the Buddhas is, we find that It is liberation from delusion and letting our True Self manifest to the full. For some, this liberation from delusion means that life liberates us from life, and death liberates us from death. Therefore, both our getting out of birth-and-death and our entering into birth-and-death are the Great Way. Both our laying birth-and-death aside and our going beyond birth-and-death to the Other Shore are also the Great Way. Our True Self revealing Itself to the full is what life is, and life is our True Self revealing Itself to the full. At the time when our True Self reveals Itself, we can say that there is nothing that is not a full displaying of life, and there is nothing that is not a full displaying of death.

It is the operating of this True Self that causes life to come about and causes death to come about. At the very moment when we fully manifest this functioning of our True Self, It will not necessarily be something great or something small, or the whole universe or some limited bit of it, or something drawn out or something short and quick. Our life at this very moment is the True Self in operation, and the operating of our True Self is our life at this very moment.

Life is not something that comes and life is not something that goes; life is not something that reveals itself and life is not something that is accomplished. Rather, life is a displaying of one's Buddha Nature to the full, and death is also a displaying of one's Buddha Nature to the full. You need to realize that both life and death occur in the immeasurable thoughts and things within ourselves.

Also, calmly reflect upon whether this life of the present moment, as well as the various thoughts and things that co-exist with this life, are a part of life or are not a part of life. There is nothing—not a single moment, not a single thought or thing—that is not a part of life. There is nothing—not a single matter, not a single state of mind—that is not also a part of life. For instance, life is like a time when I am on board a boat. While I'm on this boat, I manipulate the sails, I handle the rudder, I push the punting pole. At the same time, the boat is carrying me along, and there is no 'I' that is outside this boat. My sailing in a boat is what makes this boat be a boat. You need to do your utmost to explore through your training what is going on at this very moment, for at this very moment there is nothing other than the world of the boat. The sky, the water, the shore—all have become this moment of the boat, which is completely different from occasions when I am not on a boat. Thus, life is what I am making life to be, and I am what life is making me to be. While being carried on a boat, my body and mind, with their inner causes and outer conditions, are, all together, a part of the way a boat functions. The whole of the great earth and the whole of the expanse of space are, likewise, a part of the way a boat functions. What this metaphor is saying is that life is what 'I' is, and 'I' is what life is.



The venerable monk Meditation Master Engo Kokugon once said, “Life is a manifestation of one’s entire being, and death is a manifestation of one’s entire being.” We need to thoroughly explore this saying and clarify what it means. In the present instance, what ‘thoroughly exploring this saying’ refers to is the principle that life is a manifestation of one’s entire being and is not concerned with beginnings and endings, for life is the whole of the great earth and the whole of unbounded space. At the same time, not only does this principle not stand against life’s being a manifestation of one’s entire being, but it also does not stand against death’s being a manifestation of one’s entire being. When death is also a manifestation of one’s entire being, it is the whole of the great earth and the whole of unbounded space. And at the same time, not only does this principle not stand against death’s being a manifestation of one’s entire being, but it also does not get in the way of life’s being a manifestation of one’s entire being. Hence, life does not get in the way of death, and death does not get in the way of life. Both the whole of the great earth and the whole of unbounded space exist within life, and they exist within death as well.

Even so, it is not that the whole of the great earth is one thing and the whole of unbounded space is another thing; both operate to the full in life and both operate to the full in death. Therefore, even though it is not a matter of their being

one single thing, it is also not a matter of their being different things. And even though it is not a matter of their being different things, it is also not a matter of their being identical things. And even though it is not a matter of their being identical things, it is also not a matter of their being many things. Hence, there are the various thoughts and things that are manifestations of one's entire being in life, and there are also the various thoughts and things that are manifestations of one's entire being in death, and there are the manifestations of one's entire being that are beyond 'life' and beyond 'death'. Both life and death exist within the manifestation of one's entire being.

Thus, all functions in life-and-death will be present, like a strong-armed man flexing his muscles or like someone at night reaching behind himself to grope for his pillow. They come forth whenever there is abundant luminosity from one's marvelous innate spiritual abilities. At the very moment of their coming forth, because the person is functioning fully within their coming forth, such a one may think that before they fully appeared in front of him, they had not appeared at all. Yet, before this full manifestation, there were previous manifestations of that person's True Nature. Even though such a person may say that he had some previous manifestation of his True Nature, it has not inhibited the present appearance of his True Nature. Thus it is that discriminatory opinions may arise before one's very eyes.¹

Delivered to the assembly in the Kyoto office of the Governor of Izumi Province on the seventeenth day of the twelfth lunar month in the third year of the Ninji era (January 10, 1243).²

Copied by me on the nineteenth day of the first month in the fourth year of the same era (February 9, 1243).³

Ejō

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1. Such as the opinion that the manifestation of one's True Nature is a one-time thing.
 2. The governor, Yoshishige Hatano, was one of Dōgen's principle supporters.
 3. The seeming contradiction that both the third and the fourth years of the Ninji era occurred in 1243 is due to the fact that, in the lunar calendar, the last day of the third year fell on January 21, 1243, according to the Western solar calendar. The new lunar year, by our reckoning, then began on January 22.