

On the Moon as One's Excellent Nature

(*Tsuki*)

Translator's Introduction: Although the Chinese characters that Dōgen employs for the title of this discourse may be translated as 'one's excellent Nature', this term does not occur in the text itself. Rather, Dōgen appears to have used it to spell out with Chinese characters the Japanese word *tsuki*, 'the moon', which is a common Buddhist metaphor for one's innate Buddha Nature—the Moon of our Original Nature. And, at the same time, one's excellent Nature is synonymous with one's innate Buddha Nature.

Some readers may find this discourse less obscure if they substitute the words 'Buddha Nature' for the word 'Moon'.

Instances of Moons becoming full are not just 'three and three before that' and 'three and three after that'. And our innately fully perfected Moons are likewise not just 'three and three before that' and 'three and three after that'.¹ This is why Shakyamuni Buddha said:

*The true Dharma Body of the Buddha
Is unbounded, like empty space.
It reveals Its form by conforming to an object,
Like water reflecting the moon.*

The Ultimate Reality described as being 'like water reflecting the moon' may also be expressed as 'the Water and Its Moon', 'the real Water', 'the real Moon', 'being within Reality,' or 'the Reality within'. It goes beyond expressing what things appear to be like as Reality, for Reality is what is.

The real Dharma Body of the Buddha is just like unbounded space. And because this 'unbounded space' is the real Dharma Body of the Buddha, the whole earth, the whole of all realms, all thoughts and things—that is, all things that manifest—are, in themselves, unbounded space. The hundreds of things that sprout up and the myriad forms that they take—all of which manifest before our very eyes—are just like the Dharma Body of the Buddha, and they are the real Dharma

1. That is, instances of people fully realizing their Buddha Nature (that is, having a kenshō) are just as beyond count as the number of people who have Buddha Nature, which is everyone.

Body of the Buddha, and they are like the moon in water.² The time of the Moon's arising is not invariably at night, and the night is not necessarily the dark, so do not depend simply on narrow human ways of measuring things.³ Even in places where there is no sun or moon, there will be day and night, for the sun and moon do not exist for the sake of day and night. And because the Sun and Moon are, both together, what is ultimately real, there is not just one or two Moons, nor just a thousand or myriad Moons. Even if some people say of themselves that their own Moon supports and relies upon their personal opinion of what the Moon is, such is their personal view of the Moon, and it is not necessarily an expression of the Buddha's Truth nor an instance of their wisely discerning what the Buddha's Truth is. Thus, even though we may say that there is a Moon tonight, the Moon tonight is not last night's Moon. You need to explore through your training that tonight's Moon through and through—beginning, middle, and end—is just tonight's Moon.⁴ Because a Moon has inherited the Truth from a Moon, the Moon exists as such, but It is not something new or old.



Meditation Master Banzan Hōshaku once said:

*The Moon of our heart and mind is solitary and at the
full,
Its light swallows up all forms that arise.⁵
Its light is not something that illumines concrete objects,
And concrete objects, in turn, are not things that truly
exist.⁶
When Its light and objects both vanish from sight,
There is still That which is the What.*

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2. That is, the Dharma Body of the Buddha has two characteristics: It is like unbounded space and It is unbounded space. Further, all things that arise and manifest themselves have three characteristics: they are like the Dharma Body of the Buddha, they are the Dharma Body of the Buddha, and they are reflections of the Dharma Body of the Buddha.
 3. That is, a kenshō does not necessarily occur in the middle of the night.
 4. That is, how one's Buddha Nature may manifest today (like today's phase of the Moon) will be just for this day, and it will still be the whole of one's Buddha Nature.
 5. 'Swallows up', both here and throughout this discourse, is a metaphor meaning 'takes in and comprehends'.
 6. That is, they do not have a permanent, unchangeable nature.

What is now being expressed is that, without fail, the Ancestors of the Buddha, as disciples of the Buddha, possess the Moon of their heart and mind because they treat their Moon as their heart and mind. If It were not the Moon, It would not be their heart and mind, and without a heart and mind, there is no Moon. 'Solitary and at the full' means that It lacks for nothing. Whatever is more than 'two or three', we call 'all things'. When all things are in the Moon's Light, they are not seen as 'all things', hence Its Light swallows up all things. Since all things spontaneously absorb the Moon's light completely, Its Light swallows up the Moon's light, which means that Its Light swallows up all things. For instance, it will be the Moon swallowing up the Moon, and the Light swallowing up the Moon.⁷ Accordingly, the Master expressed the Matter* as:

*Its light is not something that illumines concrete objects,
And concrete objects, in turn, are not things that truly
exist.*

Because Banzan had attained such a state, when people could be helped to reach the Other Shore by means of a Buddha Body, he would forthwith manifest his Buddha Body and give voice to the Dharma for their sake. And when people could be helped to reach the Other Shore by means of an ordinary physical body, he would forthwith manifest that customary physical body of his and give voice to the Dharma for their sake. It is said that he never failed to turn the Wheel of the Dharma from within his Moon. Even though the lunar yin energy and the solar yang energy illumine objects by means of the fire jewel—which is the Sun—and the water jewel—which is the Moon—he would forthwith manifest both. This heart and mind of his was nothing other than his Moon, and this Moon of his was, as a matter of course, his own heart and mind. This is how the Buddha's Ancestors, as disciples of the Buddha, master the principle of mind and the details of mind.



A Buddha of the past once said, "The whole of your mind contains everything, and everything contains the whole of your mind." Since this is so, your mind is everything, and everything is your mind. Because your heart and mind are your Moon, your Moon must be the Moon. Because everything, which is your

7. 'The Moon's light' refers to the reflected light of the Sun (that is, Buddha Nature), whereas 'the Moon's Light' refers to the Sun Itself.

* See *Glossary*.

heart and mind, is completely the Moon, the whole universe throughout is the whole Moon throughout. And being intimately acquainted with your self, through and through, is being intimately acquainted with your Moon, through and through. Even with the ‘three and three before, or three and three after’ over time immemorial, who among them is not a Moon? The Buddha with the Solar Face and the Buddha with the Lunar Face—which are our body and mind along with their internal propensities and external conditions at this present moment—will both be within our Moon.⁸ Birth-and-death and coming-and-going will both be in our Moon, and the whole universe in all ten quarters will be the top, bottom, left, and right within our Moon. Whatever is going on right now in our daily life will be just some of the hundreds of things that sprout up in our mind ever so clearly within our Moon, and it will be what sprouts up in the minds of the Buddhas and Ancestors within Their Moon.



Great Master Tōsu Daidō of Shuchou Province was once asked by a monk, “What is the Moon like when It is not yet full?”⁹

The Master answered, “It swallows up three or four Moons.”

The monk then asked, “And after It is full, what is It like?”

The Master replied, “It vomits out seven or eight Moons.”¹⁰

What is being thoroughly explored here are the terms ‘not yet full’ and ‘after becoming full’. Both of them are phases of the Moon. Within the three or four Moons that are in your Moon, there will be One that is not yet full; within the seven or eight Moons that are in your Moon, there will be One that is now at Its full. ‘Swallowing up’ is associated with ‘three or four Moons’; such a moment as this is synonymous with a time when one’s Moon is not yet full. ‘Vomiting out’ is associated with ‘seven or eight Moons’; such a moment as this is synonymous with a time after one’s Moon has reached Its full. When the Moon swallows up Moons,

8. The Buddha with the Solar Face is said to have a lifespan of 1,800 years, whereas the lifespan of the Buddha with the Lunar Face is said to be one day. This reference was used by Meditation Master Baso to describe our original Buddha Nature as being beyond any temporal measure, such as ‘long’ or ‘short’.

9. The topic of the discourse now shifts from the Moon as a reference to our Buddha Nature being ‘what we are’ to the Moon’s phases, which is how our Buddha Nature manifests at different times.

10. ‘Vomits out’ is a metaphor for ‘giving spiritual expression to’.

It will involve three or four of Them.¹¹ There will be signs of the Moon's swallowing up and manifestations of the Moon's vomiting out. In the Moon's vomiting out phases, there will be seven or eight of Them. There will be a Moon that manifests in the vomiting out, for the Moon is also a manifestation of vomiting out. Therefore, It is our swallowing up completely and our vomiting out completely. The whole of the earth and the whole of the heavens is what we vomit out. The whole universe is what we swallow up. We need to swallow up self and swallow up other, and we need to vomit out self and vomit out other.



Once when Shakyamuni Buddha was giving Teaching to the Bodhisattva Vajragarbha,¹² He said:

Just as the moving eye, for instance, can make still waters seem to pitch and roll, and just as the steady eye makes fire seem to spiral up, so too, when clouds are hastening by, the moon seems to move in the opposite way, and when one's boat is departing, the shore appears to drift in a counter direction.

We need to thoroughly explore and clarify just what it is that the Buddha has said concerning the hastening of clouds and the moving of the moon, as well as about the departing of one's boat and the drifting of the shore. Do not study this in haste or try to make it accord with the views of ordinary, worldly people. At the same time, it is a rare person who can recognize what this Buddha has voiced as the Voicing of a Buddha. When you can say that you are studying this statement as what a Buddha has voiced, then you will understand that full realization does not necessarily refer to 'body and mind' or to 'enlightenment and nirvana', and 'enlightenment and nirvana' do not necessarily refer to 'full realization' or to 'body and mind'.

As to the hastening of clouds and the moving of the moon, as well as the departing of the boat and the drifting by of the shore of which the Tathagata spoke, at the time when the clouds hasten, the moon appears to move, and at the time

11. That is, when people are on the verge of having a spiritual experience, they will begin to show signs of its coming, which is often described as someone's 'beginning to ripen'.

12. Vajragarbha, 'He Who is a Veritable Treasure House for the Diamond of Wisdom', is a manifestation of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva, who represents patient, loving activity. Please see the *Glossary* for an explanation of the term 'Bodhisattva'.

when the boat sails off, the shore appears to drift by. This is saying that the clouds and the moon are simultaneously moving at the same pace, at the same time, and in the same manner, which is beyond one beginning as the other ends, and beyond one being before and the other after. Also, it is saying that the boat and the shore are simultaneously moving at the same pace, at the same time, and in the same manner, which is beyond one starting when the other stops and beyond the two moving in cycles. When we learn about how people behave, human behavior is beyond just a matter of starting and stopping, and the behavior of starting and stopping is beyond just being human. Do not compare or judge the behavior of humans by taking up 'starting and stopping'. The hastening of clouds and the moving of the moon, as well as the sailing off of a boat and the drifting off of the shore, are all like this. Do not foolishly take a narrow-minded view of this. Do not overlook the main point. The hastening of a cloud is not described by 'east, west, south, or north' and the moving of the moon is without cease, day and night, in both the past and present. The sailing off of the boat and the drifting of the shore are beyond the three temporal worlds of past, present, and future, and they can make use of the three temporal worlds. Therefore, having 'arrived' right away at this very moment, one is sated and no longer feels hungry.

At the same time, foolish people fancy that an unmoving moon appears to be moving due to the moving of the clouds, and that the drifting shore appears to be drifting due to one's sailing off on a boat. If it were as these foolish people say, how could it possibly be the Teaching of the Tathagata? The main point of the Buddha Dharma is beyond the small-minded views of ordinary human beings and those in lofty positions. Although It is beyond reckoning, there is still training and practice in accord with the trainee's abilities. Who among you would fail, time and again, to cast your line for boat and shore, and who among you would fail to quickly cast an eye to clouds and moon? What you need to understand is that the Tathagata was not using the clouds as a metaphor for something physical or mental, nor was He using the moon as a metaphor for something physical or mental, nor was He using the boat as a metaphor for something physical or mental, nor was He using the shore as a metaphor for something physical or mental.¹³ You need to take your time to thoroughly and diligently explore this principle. One inch of the Moon's movement is equal to the full realization of the Tathagata, and the full realization of the Tathagata is but an inch of the Moon's movement. It is not a matter of moving or halting, nor is it a matter of progressing or retreating. Because

13. In other words, the reality of Buddha Nature is beyond our normal ways of thinking about body and mind.

the movement of the Moon goes beyond being merely a metaphor, Its essential nature and the way It appears are Its being 'solitary and at the full'.

Keep in mind that the pace of the Moon, even if it is at a gallop, is beyond having a beginning, middle, and end. This is why the first Moon has a second Moon. The first (which is Its Essential Nature) and the second (which is the way It appears) are, both alike, Moons. 'A good time for training and practice' is what the Moon is, and 'a good time for making offerings' is what the Moon is, and, with a swish of one's sleeves, taking one's leave to go to the Meditation Hall is what the Moon is.¹⁴ Its roundness or squareness is beyond the turning of the wheel of coming and going. Whether making use of the turning wheel of coming and going or not making use of it, the Master grabs hold of the deluded certainty of his trainees or lets them go on in their own way as he gives free reign to his elegantly skillful means, and so it is with many Moons.

Written by me on the sixth day of the first lunar month in the fourth year of the Ninji era (January 27, 1243), whilst at Kannondōri in Kōshōhōrin-ji Temple.

The Mendicant Monk Dōgen

Copied by me on the day before of the end of the summer retreat in the first year of the Kangen era (July 22, 1243).

Ejō

14. This sentence presents the three responses to the question "How is the Moon right now?" which was put by Baso to his three disciples, Seidō Chizō, Hyakujō Ekai, and Nansen Fugan, who were watching the moon one night.