

On the Universal Body of the Tathagata

(*Nyorai Zenshin*)

Translator’s Introduction: This short discourse is based on passages from the *Lotus Scripture*. In it, Dōgen discusses the Buddha (the Awakened One) as the Tathagata (the One Who Comes Thus), that is, as someone who has completely dropped off self and now simply is, just as He is. The body of One who is a Tathagata is no longer a matter of something personal but embraces the whole universe and is, therefore, the Universal Body. This Universal Body incorporates all that the historical Buddha leaves behind, such as His relics. And His Universal Body includes not only these relics but also His teachings, particularly in the form of written, bound copies.

Once when Shakyamuni Buddha was residing on Vulture Peak at Rajagriha, He addressed Lord Bhaisajya the Bodhisattva*-Mahasattva* of Healing, saying, “Lord Bhaisajya, in every place where this Teaching of Mine is voiced, or read, or recited aloud, or written down, or stored where bound copies of the Scriptures are kept, you should erect a seven-jeweled* stupa,* one that is especially tall, broad, and well adorned. There is no need to install a relic within it.¹ And why? Because the Universal Body of the Tathagata already exists within this stupa. This stupa should be presented with alms, revered, highly honored, and eulogized by your offering all kinds of flowers and incense, jeweled garlands and silken canopies, banners and flags, music and songs of praise. If there are people who are able to catch sight of this stupa and thereupon bow in respect and offer alms, by all means you should realize that they are approaching supreme, fully perfected enlightenment.”

What He called ‘bound copies of Scriptures’ are like what has been voiced, what has been read, what has been recited, and what has been written down. Bound copies of Scripture are what True Nature is. The True Nature of the seven-jeweled

* See *Glossary*.

1. A relic (J. *shāri*; Skt. *śarīra*) customarily consisted of some physical part of a deceased Buddha or Ancestor, such as ashes, bones, or hair.

stupa that needs to be erected is called the Stupa. As to the ultimate measure of Its height and breadth, that measure is, of necessity, the measure of True Nature. The Universal Body of the Tathagata that already exists within this Stupa refers to the bound Scriptures, which is synonymous with the Universal Body.

Accordingly, Teachings that have been voiced, read, recited, and written down are what the Universal Body of the Tathagata is. This is why we should make offerings to, revere, highly honor, and eulogize It by presenting It with all kinds of flowers and incense, jeweled garlands and silken canopies, banners and flags, music and songs of praise. Offerings may be such things as celestial flowers, celestial incense, and celestial canopies because these are all True Nature. Or they may be the choicest of flowers and incense, or kesas* and robes esteemed among ordinary people for these are all True Nature. Offerings of alms and offerings of reverence are what True Nature is.

You should erect a Stupa, reminding yourself that there is no need to install a relic within It, for you know that bound Scriptures are the relics of the Tathagata and are part of the Universal Body of the Tathagata. Beyond doubt, these Scriptures are golden words that came from the Buddha's mouth, and there can be no spiritually beneficial endeavor that surpasses seeing and hearing them. Be quick to accumulate merit and pile up virtuous acts. If there are people who bow in reverence to this Stupa and make an offering to It, keep in mind that they are all approaching supreme, fully perfected enlightenment. When we catch sight of this Stupa, we should, in all sincerity, respectfully bow and make an offering to It. Then we will all be close to supreme, fully perfected enlightenment. 'Being close' does not mean 'being close after being separate from', nor does it mean 'being close after coming together'; 'being close' refers to one's enlightenment being supreme and fully perfected. When we experience, here and now, the receiving and passing on, reading and reciting, understanding and expressing, writing and copying of Scriptures, it is our catching sight of this Stupa. We should rejoice, for we are all close to supreme, fully perfected enlightenment.

Well now, the bound copies of the Scriptures are the Universal Body of the Tathagata. Bowing in respect to copies of Scripture is bowing in respect to the Tathagata. To have encountered copies of Scripture is to have an audience with the Tathagata, for copies of Scripture are relics of the Tathagata and relics of the Tathagata are these Scriptures. Even if you have learned that copies of Scriptures are relics, if you do not know that relics refers to copies of Scriptures, then you have not yet arrived at what the Buddha was saying. The True Nature of all things here and now is what copies of Scripture are. The world of humans as well as celestial worlds, the oceans as well as empty space, this planet of ours as well as

other worlds are all True Nature; they are all copies of Scriptures; they are all relics. Receiving and passing on, reading and reciting, understanding and expressing, writing and copying Scriptures creates relics and will open the way to enlightenment. This is what is meant by the phrase, ‘following the Scriptures’. There are the relics of former Buddhas, and the relics of present-day Buddhas, and the relics of pratyekabuddhas,* and the relics of Wheel-turning Lords,* and the relics of those who are veritable lions among men, as well as the relics of wooden Buddhas, and the relics of painted Buddhas, and the relics of human beings. Buddhas and Ancestors during the present-day generations in Great Sung China are letting Their relics show while They are still alive, and many are producing relics with Their cremation: these are all copies of Scripture.



Once, when addressing a large assembly, Shakyamuni Buddha said, “The lifetime to which I succeeded by traveling the Bodhisattva Way has not even yet been exhausted, but will still be twice the past number of eons.” Our present eighty-four gallons of relics are, frankly, what the life of a Buddha is.² A lifetime of practicing the Bodhisattva Way is, from the start, not limited merely to the three-thousand great-thousandfold world; it can be something beyond calculation, as is the Universal Body of the Tathagata, and as are the bound copies of Scripture.



The Bodhisattva Who Accumulates Wisdom said:

I have seen Shakyamuni the Tathagata pursue the Bodhisattva Way without ever ceasing, doing difficult and painful practices for incalculable eons, and thereby accumulating merit and piling up virtue. When I have looked at the three-thousand great-thousandfold world, there is no place even the size of a mustard seed where, as a Bodhisattva, He has not laid down his life for the sake of others. And because of that He was able to fully experience the path to enlightenment.

Be clear about this, this three-thousand great-thousandfold world is a single instance of a sincere and trusting heart, and it is a single instance of emptiness of self, and it is the Universal Body of the Tathagata, which does not depend on our

2. ‘Eighty-four gallons of relics’ is an estimate of the average size of a human body.

laying down our life or on our not laying it down. Relics are beyond being something prior to a Buddha or after a Buddha, and they are not something that lines up beside a Buddha. Performing difficult and painful practices for immeasurable eons has been the daily activity of the Buddha's womb and the Buddha's hara;³ these practices are the Buddha's Skin and Flesh, Bones and Marrow. As has been said of Him, "He has never ceased to be." Even after becoming an Awakened One, He practiced ever more vigorously, and even though He has transformed our great-thousandfold world, He still goes forward. The everyday life of His Universal Body is no different.

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3. The Buddha's womb is the source from which all things are produced by one's Buddha Nature. The Buddha's hara is the place from which the Child of the Lord is born.